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SILVER CIRCUS

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ADAM AND EVE AND PINCH ME. *Tales*
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THE FIELD OF MUSTARD. *Tales*
HIPS AND HAWS. *Poems*
PELAGEA. *Poems*
COLLECTED POEMS. *Poems*

SILVER CIRCUS

TALES BY

A. E. COPPARD

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Warrensburg

JONATHAN CAPE
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SILVER CIRCUS

SILVER CIRCUS

I

HANS SIEBENHAAR, A STREET PORTER, IS BASKING on his stool in a fine street of Vienna, for anybody to hire for any sort of job. He is a huge man with a bulbous hairless face that somehow recalls a sponge, and this sponge is surmounted by a flat peaked hat encircled by a white band bearing these words in red: *Wiener Dienstmann*. His voice, which we shall hear later on, is a vast terrifying voice, that seems to tear a rent in Space itself. At fifty years of age Hans is a conspicuous man. But, a street porter! Not a profitable way of life, yet it must serve, and must continue to serve. It is a hot July morn, tropical; there are many noises but no one speaks. The fruit-stall women are silent and hidden, they have pinned newspapers around the edges of their big red umbrellas. It is stifling, languorous; one thinks of lilac, of cool sea, of white balloons; the populace tears off its hat, fans itself desperately, sips ice in the cafés, and still perspires. The very street sounds are injurious to the mind. The drivers of carts wear only their breeches, their bodies are brown as a Polynesian's and lovely to behold.

Just such a day it was as the day twelve months gone when Mitzi Siebenhaar, his second wife, had run away with that Julius Damjancsics. Yes, please very much, she had left him. Hans took off his hat. After contemplating its interior as if it

were a coffer of extraordinary mystery, he sighed huskily into it. How was it possible to understand such an accident? Smoothing his brown bald skull with the other hand, he collected so much sweat upon his hairy freckled fingers that as he shook them the drops simply splashed upon the pavement. Young Mitzi! It was her youth, ah, God bless, she had the pull of him there, a whole fifteen years, fifteen years younger, youth as well as beauty, beauty as well as youth. At thirty-five she was as lovely as a girl, fitful and furious just like a girl, so he was only able to keep her for one little year; that is to say, keep her faithful, to himself. One little year! That is not long, but for a man of fifty it is so difficult, yes; but then Julius Damjancsics was just as old. And she had gone off with him! What could she see in Julius Damjancsics? How was it possible to understand such an accident? They had all been friends together, and Julius could play the mandolin, but Hans could pound him into dust. What could she see in Julius Damjancsics? He could crush him in one fist, like a gherkin. If he had caught them – but that was difficult too. Belgrade he had gone to, for Julius Damjancsics was a Serbian, and Buda-Pesth he had gone to, for Mitzi was Hungarian, but this Julius was a wandering fellow and very deceitful. So. Well, it was pitiful to think of in such hot weather, there was nothing to be done, he had come back to Vienna. And now here he was brooding, here he was groaning; pitiful to think of.

At last he said to himself: 'Let us wipe our tears and forget that Christ died. Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritu Sancto,' he murmured, for he was a good Catholic man, as Father Adolf of Stefans Dom could testify.

'Porter!' cried a voice.

Hans looked up quickly and put on his hat.

'Sir,' said he.

A big man, with a big important foreign face, and fat and flourishing appearance, and shiny black boots with grey cloth tops, stood as it were examining the porter. Although the boots were fastened with what appeared to be pearl buttons, they were rather uncared for, but to offset this a large gold watch-chain was lavishly displayed, with jewelled tiepin and studs. The man's fists were in his trousers pockets; he twirled a long thin cigar between his rich red lips. Immense and significant, he might have been a Turk or a Tartar, but he was neither; he was the boss of a Roumanian Circus.

'Come with me, I want you,' and the huge Hans followed the circus man to a bier-garten where another man was waiting who might have been a Tartar or a Turk. He called him Peter, he was certainly his brother, and Peter called him Franz. All three sat down and drank together.

'Tell me, Hans Siebenhaar,' said Franz, 'you are a strong man?'

'Yes, I am a strong man, that is so.'

'You have a good voice?'

'Please . . .' Hans paused. 'I am no singer, not much.'

'Ah! No, no, no. You have a strong voice to speak, to shout, you can make great sounds with your voice?'

'O ay,' Hans agreed, 'I have a strong voice, that is so, very strong, I can make a noise.' And there and then he accorded them a succession of hearty bellows in testimony. There was only one other occupant of the bier-garten, a man with an Emperor Franz-Josef sort of face and white whiskers like the wings of an easy chair, who sat smoking a china pipe under an acacia tree. And he seemed to be deaf, for he did not take the slightest notice of the appalling outcry. Two waiters rushed with alarm into the garden, but Franz waved them away.

'Good,' said Franz reflectively. 'Listen now.' And sitting there between the brothers Hans heard them propound to him a scheme that smote him with amazement and bereft him of sympathy; it filled him indeed with any and every emotion but that of satisfaction. They wanted him, in brief, to become a tiger.

'No.' Hans was indignant, and he was contemptuous. 'I do not understand, but I do not do this.'

Not at once – they cried – not to-day. No, no. Plenty of time, a week's time in fact. And they would instruct him in the art of impersonating a tiger, they would rehearse him, and for a single performance, one night only, they would give him

two hundred Austrian shillings. Peter the Turk declared it was far too much money. Franz the Tartar invoked his God.

There is more in this – thought Hans – than meets my ear; I have to beware of something. Aloud he inquired: 'Two hundred shillings?'

'Two hundred,' said Peter.

'Shillings,' echoed Franz, scratching the table with a wooden toothpick.

'And, please very much, I am to do?'

They told him what he was to do. He was to be sewn up in the skin of a tiger; he was to enact the part of a tiger in their menagerie; he was to receive two hundred shillings. Very very simple for a strong man. Hans Siebenhaar was to be sewn up in the tiger's hide for two hundred shillings; he was to prance and fight and hideously roar in the best way he knew so that the hearts of the audience be rocked within them and fly into their throats – and the two hundred shillings was his. It was his voice, it was because of his great bellowing tigerish voice that they had come to him. Such a voice was worth some riches to them, and so they were going to pay two hundred shillings for his services.

'Two hundred shillings?' murmured Hans.

'Two hundred,' said Peter, and Franz said 'Two hundred.'

It is not – thought Hans – to be sneezed at, but there is more in this than strokes my hearing; I must be wary.

'Why do you not have,' he asked them, 'a real tiger?'

'But we had!' they both cried.

'And now he is dead,' said Peter.

'A real proper tiger,' Franz declared.

'But now he is dead,' repeated his brother. 'Ah, he had paws like a hassock.'

'And the ferocity!'

'Beautiful,' said Peter. 'He died of grief.'

'No, no, no,' objected Franz. 'I would not say that of this tiger.'

'But yes,' affirmed Peter. 'Of grief. He loved me, and lately I married again.'

'The heart was broken, yes, perhaps,' Franz admitted.

'His voice died away like a little whistle.' There was sorrow in Peter's eyes. 'No fury.'

'Two hundred shillings,' said Franz.

'Brrr-o-o-o-owh!' Hans suddenly roared, and skipping up he began capering and pawing madly about the garden. 'Ookah, pookah, boddle, oddle, moddle, miowh!' he roared.

The deaf old gentleman with the Franz-Josef whiskers gently laid his china pipe on the table before him; he neither observed nor heeded Hans, he only put his fingers into his mouth and extracted his false teeth. These he calmly examined, as if they were a foreign substance he had never noticed before and was wondering how it came to be there. Hans began crashing over the tables and chairs; waiters rushed into the garden and, flinging them-

selves upon the perspiring maniac, rolled him over into a corner.

'That is good,' cried Franz, 'very good!'

'Absolutely,' Peter said; 'absolutely!'

Three waiters clung to Hans Siebenhaar with the clear intention of throttling him.

'Enough!' shouted Franz. 'Let him go,' and with his powerful hands he dragged two of the waiters from the prostrate body of Hans as you would draw two pins from a pin-cushion, and likewise did Peter do with the other waiter.

'It is all right,' said Franz, and Peter said it was quite all right. They gave the waiters a few coins and soothed them. In the meantime Hans had resumed his seat, and the deaf old gentleman was replacing his teeth.

To Hans the brothers said: 'Listen,' and Hans listened. Their circus-menagerie was now on view in The Prater, and at the festival next week they had contemplated to stage a novel performance, nothing less than a combat between a lion and a tiger – ah, good business! – but just at this critical moment what does their tiger do?

'It dies,' suggested Hans.

'Dies,' agreed Franz. 'It dies. So now!'

'Yes, now?' Hans said, and nodded.

'You must be our tiger, that is the simple fact of the business. You have the voice of a tiger, and the character. You will get the two hundred shillings. Hooray! It is like lapping honey, yes.'

'But what is this?' cried Hans. 'To fight a lion!'

'Pooh!' Peter said. 'It is more friendly and harmless than any kitten.'

'No,' said Hans. 'No.'

'Yes,' said Franz. 'Yes. It is, it is but a caterpillar, I tell you.'

'No!' shouted Hans.

'It has no teeth.'

'Not I,' cried the intended victim.

'It has been in our family for a hundred years.'

'Never,' declared Hans with absolute finality, and he got up as if to go. But the brothers seized each an arm and held him down in his chair.

'Have no fear, Mr. Siebenhaar; it will love you. Two hundred and fifty shillings!'

'No, I will not; ha!'

'Mr. Siebenhaar, we can guarantee you. Three hundred shillings,' said Peter.

'And fifty,' added Franz.

'Three hundred and fifty!' repeated Hans. 'So? But what? I cannot fight a lion. No, no. I am not a woman. I have my courage, but what is three hundred and fifty shillings for my life's blood and bones?' In short, a lion was not the kind of thing Mr. Siebenhaar was in the habit of fighting.

'Ach! Your blood and bones will be as safe as they are in your trousers. You have not to fight this lion. . . .'

'No, I will not, ha!'

'. . . you have only to play with it. This lion does not fight, Mr. Siebenhaar; it will not, it cannot.'

'Why so?'

'It is too meek, it is like a lamb in a meadow that cries Baa. You have only to prance about before it and roar and roar, to make a noise and a fuss. It will cringe before you. Have no fear of him. A show, you understand – make a show.'

'I understand a show,' said Hans, 'but, please very much, permit me, I will not make a spectacle of my blood and bones.'

'So help me heaven!' shouted Franz, exasperated, 'do you think we want your bones!'

'Not a knuckle!' cried Hans.

Peter intervened. 'You misunderstand us, Mr. Siebenhaar; we desire only entertainment, we do not want a massacre.'

'You do not want a massacre!'

'A massacre is very well in its way, perhaps, in its time and place,' Peter continued, 'but a massacre is one thing, and this is another.'

'Thank you,' said Hans, 'it is very clear, that is very good.'

And Franz and Peter intimated that they were simple men of business whose only care it was to bring joy and jollity into the life of the Viennese populace; that the fury of the lion was a figment, its courage a mockery, its power a profanation of all men's cherished fears. If there was one animal in

the world more deserving the kindness and pity of mankind, more subservient, more mercifully disposed than any other – Franz assured him – it was a lion. And if there was one lion among all lions more responsive to the symptoms of affection – added Peter – it was this identical lion. Was three hundred and fifty shillings nothing to him?

'No,' Hans conceded.

'Is it a bunch of beans?'

'No, no.'

'Three hundred and fifty shillings is three hundred and fifty shillings, is it not?' Peter questioned him; and Hans replied: 'For what is past, yes; but for what is yet to come, no. The future – pardon, gentlemen – does not lie in our behinds.'

'Three hundred and fifty shillings is three hundred and fifty shillings, it is not a bunch of beans,' said Franz severely. They had men in their employ who implored him on their knees to be honourably permitted to enact the part of this tiger, but they had not the physique, they had not the voice, and, if Mr. Siebenhaar would pardon him, they had not the artist's delicate touch. One thing he, Franz, was certain of: he knew an artist when he saw one, hence this three hundred and fifty shillings.

At the end of it all Hans once more determined to wipe his tears and forget that Christ died. In effect, he agreed to be sewn up on such and such a date in the tiger's hide and to make a manifestation with Messrs. Franz and Peter's ingenuous lion, on

the solemnest possible undertaking that no harm should befall his own blood and bones.

'Thunder and lightning! What could harm you?'

'Good.'

And after parting from Hans, and when they were well out of hearing, Mr. Franz said 'Ha ha!' and Mr. Peter said 'Ho ho!'

2

Hans Siebenhaar had several rehearsals before the eventful day. Submitting himself to be sewn up in the tiger's skin, he dashed his paws upon the floor, pranced, gnashed, snarled, whirled his mechanical tail, and delivered himself of a gamut of howls eminently tigerish. Perfectly satisfactory.

'Where,' Hans would ask, 'do you keep this old lion?'

'Yes,' the brothers always replied, 'he is not well, he is sleeping; you see him next time.'

And thus it happened that Hans did not see his adversary until they met in the cage of battle. The morning of that day was dull and Hans too was dull, for on awaking he felt so strange, so very unwell, that he greatly feared he would have to send Franz word that he could not come to perform his tiger; but as the day wore on and brightened, Hans, sitting on his stool in the sunny street, brightened with it, and while thinking of the three hundred and fifty shillings his sickness left him. A nice sum of money that! And what would he do with it? Ah,

please very much, what would he not have done if Mitzi, the shameless one, had not forsaken him! They might have gone again, as they had gone of old, on one of those excursions to the Wiener Wald. He liked excursions, they were beautiful. With their happy companions they could climb the mountains, prowl in the forest for raspberries and mushrooms, and at noon they would sit under the chestnuts in the bier-garten at The Hunter's Meadow and lap the rich soup and gulp lager and talk of love and wealth and food and childhood. That was life, that was wonderful! Then they would all go and loaf in the grass and Mitzi would throw off her frock and lie half naked, browning her sleek shining body, while Julius Damjancsics thrummed his mandolin and they all murmured songs. Ah, such music! She loved it. She had a dimple behind each shoulder, a rare thing, very beautiful. In the cool of the evening there would be dancing, and they would be at Dreimarkstein in time to see the fireworks go up from The Prater – he liked fireworks, lovely. Or to the trotting races, they might go and win some more money, for when luck was on you the fancy could never deceive; beautiful horses, he loved horses. Or to the baths at Ganse-haufel – the things one could do with a little money! But there was no longer any Mitzi, she had gone with Julius Damjancsics. Gone wife, gone friend; there were no more journeys now. But a man with three hundred and fifty shillings need never lack companions, there

was a lot of friendship in three hundred and fifty shillings. But that Mitzi – she was very beautiful, that little Mitzi.

So the day wore on and the evening came and The Prater began to sparkle with the lights of its many booths and cafés, to throb with its much music, for youth was gallant and gay and there was love and money in the world. It was the hour at last. Hans had been sewn up in the tiger's skin. Now he crouched in a corner of a shuttered cage, alone, trembling in darkness, seeing no one and seen of none. There was a door in the side of his cage that led into a large empty lighted cage, and beyond that was another like his own in which walked a lion. At a certain moment the doors of the end-cages would be opened and he would have to go into that central cage and face that other beast. But no, he could not, he was limp with fear. To the stricken man came the excited voices of the people coming in to witness his calamity, and the harsh tones of the trumpeting band playing in pandemonium outside on the platform, where there was a large poster of a combat between a tiger and a lion. Hans recalled that the lion's teeth were buried in the tiger's belly amid the gushing blood, and it seemed that his very heart violently cried: 'No! No! Let me out!'

Beating upon the walls of his cage he gasped: 'In Christ's name, let me out!' but nobody heeded, no one replied, and although he tore at his tiger's skin

his paws were too cumbersome for him to free himself. He was in a trap, he knew now he had been trapped. For an eternal anguishing time the clamour went on, then that dreadful side-door which led into the central cage slid quietly open. Hans saw that this cage was yet empty, the lion's door was still closed, he was to be the first to enter. But he averted his eyes, he lay in the corner of his trap and would not budge from it. Almighty heaven! was he going to sacrifice himself for a few pitiful pieces of silver that he had never seen and never would see! He was not fit to do it, he was an old man, even his wife Mitzi had left him for another man – did they not know that! And all day long he had been unwell, sick as a dog. As he lay in his corner, refusing to budge and sweating most intensely, a sharp iron spear came through the bars and pricked him savagely in the behind. With a yell he leaped up, trying to snatch the spear. He would use it, it would save him – but he could not grasp it with his giant paws. Then came bars of red-hot iron searing him, and more spears; he was driven screaming into the central cage. The door closed behind him and he was left alone behind those terrible bars with a vast audience gazing at him. Then, ah then, in a frenzy, an epilepsy of fear, he dashed himself so violently against the bars that the crowd was spellbound. The band played riotously on, drowning his human cries. The other side-door slid open, there was silence in that other cage, but he dared not

turn to meet whatever was there; he crouched half swooning, until he caught sight of a face in the audience that he knew. Wonder of God! It was Mitzi, she herself! O but there was something to fight for now, and he turned resolutely. As he did so there was a titter in the audience that surged into general laughter – the lion had come into the cage. Truly, it was a cadaverous lion. Without the least display of ferocity or fear it stepped quietly into that cage and fixed its strong eyes upon the eyes of its enemy. Not a leap did it make, not a roar did it give, it padded forwards quietly, and the tiger retreated before it. Thus they circled and circled round the cage. Would that mocking laughter never stop?

God! Hans could bear it no longer, he turned and faced the lion, in appearance bold though trembling in his soul. The lion paused too.

'*Pater noster qui es in coelis*,' Hans gasped involuntarily.

To his unspeakable astonishment he heard the lion answer:

'*Et ne nos inducas in tentationem. Sed libera nos a malo.*'

In an incredible flash Hans realized that the lion also was a spurious creature like himself; his fears vanished, he knew now the part he had to play, and he hurled himself upon the lion, howling:

'Brrr-o-o-owh! Ookah, pookah, boddle, oddle, moddle, miowh!'

Over they rolled, lion and tiger, together, and the onlookers shook with mirth.

'Not so rough, brother!' cried a voice from inside the lion, and the tones struck a strange echo in the mind of Hans Siebenhaar. They disengaged and stood up on all fours facing each other. From the moment's silence that ensued there issued a piercing cry of fear from a woman in the audience. Hans turned, the lion turned. It was Mitzi, shrieking 'Julius! Watch out!' Hans' throbbing mind caught at that fatal name, Julius. By all the gods, was it possible! Heaven and hell, he would tear the heart out of *that* lion! *Not so rough, brother!* Ha, ha! he knew it now, that voice! Ho, ho! and with a cruel leap he jumped with his heels savagely in the middle of the lion's back, the back of Julius Damjancsics, thief of Mitzi the beloved of Hans, and down sank the lion with the tiger tearing at its throat as fearfully as any beast of the jungle. Ah, but how the people applauded; this was good in spite of the deception! They had paid to see a real lion and a real tiger contending, and they felt defrauded, insulted, but this was good, yes, it was very comical, good, good. When they noticed a man's hand appear outside the flapping paw of the tiger their joy was unbounded.

'Tear him!' they cried, as one cries to a hound with a fox. 'Ha, ha, tear him!' And Hans' loosened hand ripped up the seam in the lion's neck, and his hand went searching within the rent for a throat to

tear. At once the teeth of Julius ground themselves upon it; in a trice Hans' smallest finger was gone, severed. But Hans never uttered a cry, he gripped the throat with his wounded hand and crushed everlastingly upon it, moment after moment, until he knew that Julius Damjancsics was gone, and for ever, to hell or glory, whatever destiny had devised for him. The lion moved no more, it lay on its back with its hind legs crooked preposterously, its forelegs outspread like one crucified. The people hushed their laughter as Hans slunk trembling and sweating from that droll oaf wrapped in a lion's skin. He was afraid of it now and he crawled on all fours to the bars of the cage. The thing behind him was awfully still. The onlookers were still. They were strange, as strange as death. Mitzi was there, craning forward, her face as pale as snow. Hans caught hold of the cage bars and lifted himself to his feet. The onlookers could hear wild tormenting sobs bursting from the throat of the tiger as it hung ridiculously there. The door of Hans' first cage now slid open again, it was finished, he could go. But Hans did not go.

MY FATHER DIED WHEN HE WAS SIXTY-SEVEN – not too old, ye know – and he left me a hundred pounds. He was much respected always. There warn't a bad thing said about him, and nobody found fault. He'd a good character. He was a country labourer and I'm a country labourer, and if they say as much for me I'll be content. His character was good. Coorse, he'd been a widower for years, thirty years or more. I left home as soon as I growed up, and he lived by himself, same as I did, though he was very fond of me. Father liked that sort of life and so do I, it suits me. I was fond of him, too, in a way. I was the apple of his eye. When I was born they says I'd a head like a apple – and I dunno as 'tis changed much since. He was a shy man, and I'm not fond of gadding.

We kept his corpse for three days and then we buried him. There warn't nobody else to mourn him, so I was the only mourner, and when I got back to the house again – the house I'd been born in – I'd forgotten my way about the rooms, I'd been so long away. But I had some queer sort of wine and some cake with spice in it, and after that I learnt my father had left me a hundred pounds. Of money. There was a great brightness on the land at sunset that day; a sharpish April day it was, and it showne so much as I'd never seen afore hardly, the shadows so long and so clear. And I had the hundred pounds and I come

away. It took years to spend all that money. I began to forget my father, and I quite forgot my kindred – they're dead now. I like a glass of beer and a how-dye-do, but I was never a one for much friendship; but I never forgot the brightness that lay on the land the day my father was put into the earth. He was always a little man, shortish and light, same as me, but on the coffin plate they had engraved his name very bold and large – so as not to forget, I suppose. George Grimes Dallow, it was, and if you was to ask me what the Grimes stood for I couldn't tell you. But that brightness of that sunset seemed like a fire that was to burn up all memory of a person dead. And so it did. People forgot my father, they all forgot him, though he'd a good character and was much respected; and when I spent the last of the hundred pounds I forgot what he had looked like even. He was gone out of time and mind, might never have been born at all. He left that hundred pounds to keep his memory green for me, and so long as the money lasted I kept a hold on him. But the money's gone, and he's gone too. Nothing. If I dug out his grave I'd find only a few bones, maybe. The flesh gone, years, long ago. His ears would have fallen off and his tongue dried like a walnut. If his hair continued to grow, as they say it does for a while, 'twould be all matted like pond-weed. He was buried with his old watch laid on his heart – well, not his old watch really, for that was gold, a rare old-fashioned family timepiece; so I kept it for myself,

and bought a second-hand keyless, one of these foreigners, for that purpose. He wanted to be buried with his watch – I dunno for why, time's no use in the grave. I heard it rattle off his heart when the coffin slid down below. I wonder what's become of it now? Rusty, I 'spect. Och, St. Mary save us!

I spent the last of the hundred pounds after I'd married my wife Sophy and give up living alone. Now she's dead too, and I'm alone once more. I was fifty year old when she died – that was four year ago. Four years all but two weeks and I ain't forgotten her yet. Well, that's nature. It don't seem long sometimes, but others it's like a lifetime. Marriage didn't suit her, she was always a sick woman one way or another, always, I dunno for why. We don't know everything by a long ways, and we can't guess much. She was sick right from the start of our marriage and the money was soon gone. Sixteen months she lay on her back and it was grieving to hear her 'oller at nights. At last the doctor came and give her sommat, and she couldn't get out of bed – she fell out. Yes, and that cured her for the time being!

I'd rather be at work than abed, any road. I had two days once, along o' my back (it ketched me theer) and I sweat like a baker. But when I heard Henry go by in the road with the horses, that urged me dreadful! I says:

'Sophy, I be gooing to get up.'

She says : 'You baint!'

I says: 'I 'ool,' and I did too and all.

I was very fond of her and of course it was bad luck on us; as fond as a man could be, but – I dunno about her. It was the illness, I suppose. A timid woman she was, always seeing ghosts and that sort of canter, as if she had sommat on her mind; but what it was I could never fathom. Some said one thing, and some said another, there's no end to tittle-tattle. It's been said mor'n once – not in my hearing, though! – that Henry Ulledge was her fancy man. He's said so hisself – not in my hearing, though! – but if a man's a born liar what are ye to do with him? No, there was nothing in that, I knows, I knows. They did keep company once, afore I came on the scene; for years they kept company, but they had a flare-up. Any road, she took me, and she was my faithful wife, that I can swear. At least, as far as I knows. Of course – well, there you are.

Some people don't believe in ghosts, but of course I do. Mind you, I never seen one, but there's Lord Contillon who was buried over fifty years ago – his ghost walked. He was a queer old gentleman, and he left word as how he was to be buried in his bath-house, a little stone shanty down near the river. And his ghost walked so much that it frightened all the people out of their wits and so there had to be what is called a re-lay. And a terrible business that was: twelve clergymen, ye know, and all had to say the Lord's prayer back'ards and burn a hell of a lot of candles. But I bain't much afraid of ghosts. I

been out all hours of the night round here, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock, in the woods or the medders, and I was never fixed with a fear. What's the good on it? You do no hurt to nothing, and nothing's good safety. If you hurt nothing, nothing won't hurt you. Never. And I can take my oath – this is solemn truth as I be going to tell 'ee – I was out in Potter's Lease pretty late one night, well, 'twas midnight then, for I heard the parish clock as near as next door, you might say, and I said to myself: 'That's give a damn good strike to-night.' 'Twas dark, o' coorse, and then I see'd a lump of something laying down on the path. 'Well,' I says to myself, 'whatever can that be?' But I didn't stop, not just there, I walked on. I walked on a little ways, for I hadn't got a stick nor nothing. 'Whatever can that be?' I says. So I crope back to it and give it a bit of a stir with my foot. Well, do you know, that was a woman, laying out rough. I had a good look round and I listened, but there warn't another soul about, 'cept myself, so I kneels down and puts my arms round her – to pick her up, you see. God Almighty, she *was* drunk! I picked her up and got her out on to the road, and there she calls me every evil thing she could lay her tongue to, everything. O lord! She thought I wanted to – you know – to interfere with her. O' coorse she was drunk. I didn' know what to be at, and I left her be; just there. I didn' know what was before me or what was behind me – a woman like that! So what d'ye think I did?

I'll tell you. I took all the money out of my pockets and put it in the soles of my boots, and I walked off home thataways. You never can tell, ye know. A woman like that! Drunk. I walked all the way home with my money in the bottom of my boots. Ha, ha! That done 'em! That done 'em! I never saw anything more of her. She thought I wanted to interfere with her, I suppose. That's what it was, but o' coorse. . . .

No, I never see'd a ghost, but Sophy was always a seeing of 'em, and she had dropsy too. This Henry Ulledge used to pray for her in the chapel, but he and I couldn't get on with one another. I dunno for why, but us couldn'. He was a gospel chap, too, and used to preach in the chapel sometimes. Very well-to-do family; his father was a flower cultivator and kept a bakery, but the son was a plumber and painter. And he used to preach in the chapel, but for some reason – I can't tell for why – I couldn't abide the chap. You know, I could not like him, this Henry Ulledge, not if you was to give me forty shillings straight into my hand this very minute. Very fond of gardening he was, and a good gardener, too. Once he growed a row of beans against another chap in one of these old-fashioned competitions. I like beans myself, I'm fond of 'em, I love 'em, I could eat beans in the middle of the night. But just when these were about ripe some chaps broke in and stole the whole darn lot of 'em clean out of his garden and out of the other chap's garden, the whole darn

lot of 'em. The next Sunday Henry got up in the pulpit and began to preach his sermon. He could preach, too, when he was aminded, Henry Ulledge could, hot and strong, ye know, for them as liked it.

'Woe to the Scribes and the Pharisees,' he says. 'Woe to 'em! They shall no more enter the kingdom of glory,' he says. 'And woe to them rascals as stole Henry Ulledge and Master Nicholls's beans! They shall no more enter the kingdom of heaven than a cow shall climb up a tree back'ards and calve in a rook's nest!' A regular dandyish man, always had a umbrella for Sundays, but, you understand my meaning, there was no love lost between me and Henry Ulledge.

What there was between him and Sophy I can't say for certain, but when her was dead he came along and was agoing to follow the funeral. O' coorse, I couldn' have that caper.

'You cut out of here,' I says. 'I don't want you, and she don't want you. This is my private grief,' I told him. But he didn't go away, not far. Had his umbrella with him, too. Hung about the churchyard till all was over, and I heard tell afterwards as he chucked a bunch of flowers down the grave. Had I known of it I'd a fetched 'em out of that. I would!

It was dropsy carried her off. She was younger than me by a good bit, and taller too. And that dropsy, or whatever 'twas, made her ill for years, you could say she was always ill. For the last eight weeks of her life I can take my oath I never had my clothes

off; I just laid down beside her at nights and I got up the same in the mornings. I changed the bandages on her legs every night. Coorse, I was told to burn the old bandages, but a coorse I couldn' afford that, so I used to wash 'em myself. At other times, whenever she were extra bad, I'd stay at home and it was – well, I tell you, I wouldn' be a woman for all the men ever born. They say a woman's work is never done, and that's gospel – or I don't know what is. Look, I'd get up a mornings and light the fire. Then I'd turn to and there's the breakfast to be got and nothing to get it with, and arterwards I'd wash up the dirty plates and cups. When I turned round again the fire 'ud be out. So I'd chop up a few sticks and light it again, and then I would go and do a spell in the garden, and so help me, before I could think twice there was the dinner to be got, and when I goes for to boil him – the fire be out. I'm no fidgit, but whenever I gooed out to do some simple thing and I come back, damn me, the fire was always out. And she, poor woman, she couldn't help it, but I could do nothing right for her; the tea was too hot, or the bread was too hard, or the floor was dusty – O, she was a tartar on her back. The doctor came one day, it was one of her very bad days I'll own, and he says to her: 'Mrs. Dallow, you be a hearty woman!' My wife was a bit hard of hearing – though it wasn't any detriment to her: she was a fine proper creature otherwise – hard of hearing, so she says, 'What?' He shouts in her ear: 'You're

good for another ten years.' And I thought to myself – it was one of her very bad days, I'll own – 'Doctor, for God's sake don't say that!'

I was fond of her, ye know, there was nothing I wouldn't have done to help her, poor soul, but that's how it was. Coorse, you can't be disponsible for anything you says and only half of what you does. Life's like that, and I'm not ashamed.

She was in the hospital a month and got better, but when she came away she didn't stay better, she took worse, and so she went to stay with her sister for a fortnight. She only bore one child, poor woman, and that died in a week. A boy, it was, a fine little chap with a head like a apple. If he'd have lived he'd have fought in this last war. Never bore any other children. There were evil people who said I did give her pills, so's she shouldn' – if you ever heard of such a thing! Pills that split in two, one half to go one way and one the other – that sort of thing. If you ever heard of it! While she was at her sister's the parson wrote to me for to come over and see her. I knew what that was for; it was for her to go in the hospital again. So I says to her when I got there: 'You know what he wants to see me for?'

'Yes,' she says, 'I do, but if I got to die I'll die at home along of you, I won't go in the hospital no more.'

'Well, please yourself,' I says. 'You won't go?'

'No,' she says.

'Then it ain't no good my going to see him?'

'No,' she says, 'that ain't.'

The last day she was alive I went off to my work just before seven o'clock.

'You all right?' I says.

'Yes,' she says, and I got her up in bed and I put her slippers on.

'I'll cut your breakfast off before I go,' I telled her.

'Do,' she says. 'I'll go down about eight o'clock.'

Her sister used to come along and see her of a morning, but this morning sommat kept her back and she was late. Too late, for Sophy was gone, gone so sudden that there was a bit of that bread in her hand and another bit in her mouth. The hospital sent to me afterwards for a subscription and I give five shillings. Well, couldn' do no more. She was five foot eight.

VERONICA PARR WAS A WHIMSICAL BLISS TO HER friends, whom she named Wynken, Blynken and Nod, and they were a joy to each other and benignant to Veronica. They called her a darling, they knew she was simple, and it was clear she was favoured by fortune. Those three young women were hard London women and worked in smart London offices, but Veronica had a widowed papa, of importance on some Shipping Board (Department of Pumps and Binoculars), and this involved him in so much ocean travel that he was glad to allow his only child one hundred and fifty pounds a year, and thus enable her to live where she liked, in her own virtuous way, and be no further trouble to him. He gave her his blessing.

'Behave yourself,' he said. 'You can't be a virgin twice, you know.'

So Wynken, Blynken and Nod shared their flat with Veronica – Perry they called her – and she began to look for some light agreeable occupation. Somehow Veronica was not able to secure such a post. She was pretty enough, fair as a Scandinavian with alabaster complexion and sweet figure, but these assets were watered by a lethargy of disposition, a timidity of spirit that led the inhuman business class to vote her a duffer, and although there may be thousands of duffers superbly maintained in business it is not easy to get into business merely as a duffer.

There remained openings to tout for fur and lingerie orders on instalment terms, cigarettes on indefinable terms, coal on heartbreak terms, and insurance on terms that tore a sob from the bosom. Had it not been for her three friends, Veronica would gladly have taken all or any of these opportunities, but to her dismay their objections were extreme, not to say defamatory, and so she just stayed at home in the flat, read her books, and did a little embroidery. The house was in a square at Chiswick, old and inconvenient but full of quaintness and quality; the very windows were cleaned by the same man who had cleaned them for five and twenty years. There were two bedrooms and a big room and a kitchenette with a little black oven, a little white sink, and a little dark cupboard where a terrific mouse sometimes came and nibbled the soap that was scented with oppoponax. After the evening dinner, when they were all idle together, the girls would sit and discuss books, life, love, fashions, mankind in general, art, murder, and religion; or sometimes they would go to a cheap dance, an expensive supper, or a theatre that was as near being neither as a Christian could wish; and always they gave each other presents on birthdays and at Christmas. Altogether it was so frightfully exhilarating that Veronica sometimes could not sleep at night waiting for the joyous days to dawn.

'Norah!' Veronica would say to the Irish girl who came to clean up for them daily: 'Ask the porter if there are any letters for us to-day. He is so stupid.'

'Indeed to God, ma'am, he's a shuffler. He's de most naked face ever I'd seen.'

'Naked!'

'And whenever you see a porter wid a boil to his neck you may lay he's a gambler. I asks him: "When are you going to repair that banister on the staircase?" And he only gives me a grunt. I was breaking me head on it Friday. "When will ye mend it?" I asks him. "Och" – he says – "I'm an ignarant man." He give me tree letters for you, ma'am.'

'O!' cried Veronica.

'Now . . . now . . . where did I put de tree letters. Tree of 'em, tree fine letters dere were. I'll swing an eye round for dem, ma'am.'

The letters were presently found.

'I'd dis one meself, ma'am,' said Norah, hooking a small card box from her bag. "Tis from home dis very morning.' Inside the box there was an enamelled silver brooch in the design of a red heart roosting upon two shamrock leaves, and upon the heart was engraved *Christ Jesus*.

'Dat's true, ma'am, de way it is,' commented Norah. 'De shamrock's for Ireland, and it's God over all. Dere's *Up Cork* he's written on the box, ma'am, and a crookedy P – for Patrick.'

'And what are the three crosses for, after the P?' inquired Veronica.

'Och, dat's da skin of him!' chuckled Norah, 'I . . . I don't like him at all, ma'am; a joker he is. Whenever I was near him I felt like a fool.'

All the mornings Veronica would generally be sole mistress of the flat; in the afternoons she would sometimes succumb to the infection of a matinee, a museum, or any of those maladies incident to the life of a fine free young creature, but she would return home in time to greet the three whom she loved.

Wynken, whose real name was Ida Paragreen, was tall, fair, languorous, and mysterious. She rang up on the telephone before coming home.

'Perry,' her murmuring drawl would float from the instrument, 'have any of the ninety and nine idiots we call our friends announced their intention of coming round to dinner to-night?'

'No, darling.'

'Good. Then we shall only want two or three eggs. I'll bring them.'

'Wynken, dear, don't. I've cooked something already.'

'Queenly creature! What?'

'Listen, Wynken, I bought some macaroni.'

'My God, Perry; I say, you know! Tell me, has that Hun of a police officer left a summons for me again?'

'Yes, darling, it's here, on the bureau – the bureau – beside the telephone.'

'Beshrew the serpent,' called Wynken.

'What do you say?' Veronica piped.

'I said beshrew him. He accosted me at the door this morning, but I denied myself. Maddening oaf! Every year I am summoned for keeping a dog I do

not keep. Are you there, Perry? I have never had a dog, and never will have one.'

'No, dear. And I told the porter to tell him you had gone to Japan.'

'O, but he's such a fool, Perry; he can't even tell a lie properly.'

'No, Wynken; they got hold of Norah and served the summons on her.'

'Perry, dear, am I the only person in the world who can do everything well? Bye-bye, darling, I'm coming straight home now.'

Blynken was dark, but not handsome, and her name was Perkins; while Felicity Pink – that was Nod – had a short stature and a frizz of hair like a Polynesian. They made plans for their future life, and it seemed to be the precious gift of Veronica to evolve plans that were replete with every simple perfection. They would, for instance, always live together. They would never be married.

'Of course not,' said Ida Paragreen. 'There is no ultimate meaning to life, but life is a fact, and the possessor of a fact is naturally at pains to conserve its interesting possibilities. Please, no marriages.'

So Veronica thought they ought to acquire a houseboat – somehow – and go and live on the Thames, anywhere between Putney and Kew. Veronica had been walking that day along the river-bank above Hammersmith – watching in the autumn sunset the long sprays of seagulls that puff suddenly

out of the sky and soar across the river to Barnes. On the south shore some men were working with derrick and winch, piles of planks and sacks full of something, under a green flag with the white word *WRECK* upon it – O, it was thrilling. The men whistled to her and said foolish things. Men are such fools. And on the opposite bank were five tall chimney stacks all alike and a church tower not so very different. It made her think of Egypt. That was what she would love, a houseboat; and that was where she would like it to be. But in a little while that ideal was vanquished by the vision of a caravan. O heavens! the rapture of roaming about the changing counties behind a fat bay horse.

'We ought to live kaleidoscopically!' screamed Veronica.

Yet somehow they did not, and then for a while they trifled with the notion of a barge floating from town to town, or of a house of their own with a million conveniences and a Turkish bath. The house became a cottage – a cottage in the country, Veronica said. It would hide, just hide, in the bosom of a beautiful garden with a white gate in a hedge at the end of a tangled dewy path. She would have to have a letter-box fixed in the little white gate and give the postman a key to it in case he brought a parcel. Some postmen were quite nice, only they wore such heavy boots. Yes, a letter-box painted blue with a little brass key. And she hoped no mouse would creep into it, nor no fat bee go blundering in, mistaking it

for a hive. Birds, too, did stupid things in boxes: one made a nest in her aunt's kettle. Of course she would have a copper kettle. And different sets of gloves – for gardening, for housework, for washing up, and so on, all different – and hooks to hang them on. With labels. And she would employ a bonny devoted Scotch servant girl who had had an illegitimate baby.

'Perry darling,' Ida Paragreen said, 'you will go to live at the end of a tram line, in a villa with a brass knocker on a chocolate door. How fearfully it will gleam!'

'Do you know!' Veronica replied, 'I should rather love a brass knocker like a dog's head with a ring of rope in the mouth.'

It began to be borne upon Wynken, Blynken and Nod that Veronica talked of these new domiciles as if she alone were living in them, with no thought of themselves to share them. This was clearer still when Veronica talked of going abroad; but it was all one now, they had given up the anticipation of sharing delights so vain as these. For every procrastination Veronica had a reason, and the reason was always the superior claims of a new delight. What could one do when joy was so baffling? She was the prey of every whimsical humour, for every unlikely course she had a whim, to every gust of fancy a reaction. And she liked to think of things it was forbidden to do, not because she wanted to do them or thought they should be done, but because

she thought they should not be forbidden. Her pleasure was not in accomplishment, but in rebellion.

'Men are so absurd,' said Nod.

'So medieval,' said Blynken.

'So unæsthetic,' said Veronica.

'Yes, like bedsocks. And,' Ida Paragreen pronounced, 'we just gulp the absurdity. And men are the same. One of my grandfathers constantly objected to everything; objected to life, to love, to marriage, and to having been born; but he had four wives and lived to the age of ninety.'

'One by one?' Nod asked.

'They died,' said Ida.

There and then it was revealed that Felicity Pink had the incredible bloom of ignorance still upon her, knowing almost nothing of the relationship of the married, or the facts of engendering. Children were born: but how born, why born? Ida enlightened her.

'Good gracious!' said the awed girl. 'But surely the king and queen don't do that!'

'Yes, even kings and queens. So would she some day.'

'O! How could any girl ever care enough for any man to want to live with him. Could you, Ida?'

'I could not live with one long enough to want to marry him,' Ida pondered; 'but short of that . . . perhaps . . . I don't know, they're amusing.' There was no desire in her eyes or in her speech, but it was looped around the tall fair creature like a necklace of bright stones.

Veronica said: 'There isn't any man alive whom I could passionately adore.'

'Ho, ho!' they cried. 'Perry!' they drawled.

'There isn't. I know it, I know it,' she asserted sharply, then added in soft slow tones: 'But if I thought there was . . .!'

'Well?' they cried.

'I would not rest until I had found him.'

'And then?'

'Then! I should feel frightened.'

'What of? Ha, ha! I expect you would.' All three mocked her.

'Why, of losing him,' said Veronica.

'Suppose he was a brute, a ruffian, an immoral pig?'

'That does not matter,' Veronica said. 'I wouldn't love him because of that, but I should love him.'

'That's not love, it's mania,' Miss Perkins declared.

'It's always that,' said Ida.

'Of course' – little Nod held her frizzy head on one side – 'you could divorce him then.'

'Men don't like divorce,' Ida interposed, 'it's the women.'

Veronica was shocked: 'O, no, no! I could never do that. I can't explain. You wouldn't understand, but it's impossible.'

Their darling Veronica with all her whims and fancies and timidities was a fanatic, and they thought this absurd but loved her the more. It took her an

awful time (Heavens! but it took her years!) to make up her mind, but once it was done she shut as it were a door of iron, and if the consequences were disastrous she would support them as bland and uncomplaining as a ninepin at the onslaught of the bowl. Perhaps it was because she knew this much of herself, knew that any course she took must be irrevocable, that she hesitated and feared to decide. It was not the multiplicities of fancy that distracted her, but the fear of unknown burdens and possible pangs. Veronica was like a moth fluttering about an altar set with unlit candles, fearing lest the one she drooped her wings upon would burst into flame and consume her. And the same fear would forbid her ever to retrace her steps; that, and a certain pride in the dignity of disaster.

'I shall never marry,' said Nod, 'never.'

'Nor I,' said Blynken. And Veronica agreed.

Wynken, puffing her cigarette with a non-committal air, said: 'You *need* never marry, my dears.'

The others began to chant in unison: 'This round table pledges itself; we will be virgins for ever.'

'Make it spinsters,' sighed Ida Paragreen.

'You can't be a virgin twice,' bubbled Veronica; 'my papa reminded me of that.'

'I don't suppose,' said Ida, with her most bored air, 'that any woman would ever want to be.'

'I expect,' Veronica sighed, 'I should be a complete fool with the man I loved. I know it.'

'Sweet fool,' murmured Ida.

'I know it,' Veronica went on, 'and that's why I don't want him. At least, not yet.'

Such a figure provoked their worst thoughts of the best intentions. 'Perry, you are being vulgar!'

Veronica breathed: 'I would just lay myself at his feet.'

And so, for a while, Veronica's new enchantment was about some man she might love, and how she would behave with that angelic being. Veronica's conceits, much as they mocked at them, influenced her friends more than she knew, more than they influenced herself. She never followed them along their primrose paths, she was content to realize her dreams by contemplation, but Ida found a lover, Nod knew some fellows, and eventually Ella Perkins went and married a cheesemonger with a harelip who lived in Fulham – a place where, as Ida remarked, you rode on the tops of omnibuses behind people whose necks wanted washing. Why she did it they knew not, they only knew that some woman is always getting married to some man like that.

Even then Veronica did not go to live in a houseboat or a caravan or a cottage in the country, although she did very nearly go abroad. In the end, however, she did not, nor did she bother about such things any more, for she quietly and irrevocably married a tar-distiller named Quass who took her to live in a villa in Golders Green. There was a bold brass door-knocker, and fearfully it did gleam!

Arpad Quass, though remotely Teutonic in origin, was as English as St. Paul's Cathedral. He was nearer forty than thirty, with a vibrating baritone voice; experienced, courtly, and magnificently tailored; but Ida and Nod could not forgive him for taking their gentle friend. At first sight he appeared handsome, but his features did not retain their attraction; there was something of *nouveau art* about them. They were not so much well carved as well curled – Ida said. Almost a giant, he was tall and bulky, with a russet moustache cut to complacency, the complexion of a rural butcher, and when asked how he did he would reply: 'I am fit to fight for my life.' They disliked him; he never struck for them one single spark of the interest that had kindled the fire of enchantment for Veronica, and they were laid low by this mystery of her conquest and enslavement – for there could be no doubt of Veronica's passionate feeling for him. To their minds he was a high-handed man, who took a great deal more than himself for granted. He lounged easily and talked a lot. Exactitude – that was his note, he would murder a generalization as if it were a pest. Veronica loved generalizing, so did Wynken and Nod; for this reason Arpad disapproved of them, particularly Ida Paragreen. And he had an academic ferocity that occasionally harrowed the soul of Veronica with factitious terrors, for he was one of those who cry war when there is no war, whose end in battle is not justice but domination. To his wife

he was tender and lavish, they had their fill of motoring and dancing, tennis, golf, bridge and so on, and she lived but in him, adapting herself with delight to his desires and habits. His ways were the ways of a sportsman. Away from business, at which he was apt and quite well rewarded, he revelled in competitive games, and in these he was remarkably successful, for he played with a terrific intensity that often disarmed his opponents.

To beat your man, that was the right true end of all games and deeds. The most marvellous thrill in life – he declared – was to have your finger on the trigger, your enemy dead-sighted, and then to see him fall. 'Christ Heaven!' he would mutter, and perspire with emotion. At such moments Veronica shuddered, but shuddering she adored him.

A few months after their marriage he said to her: 'I hope, my dear (I don't mean it at all unkindly or selfishly), I hope there won't be any children. Not yet.'

Veronica folded her hands across her knees: 'What do you think, Arpad?'

'I think it would be a little premature. Just now. Children are a great responsibility, a great burden, and a great tie; you would have to give up everything, tennis, golf, dancing, and, you know, they would interfere a good deal, they would spoil your life. For myself, I say No. What do you say?'

Veronica unfolded her hands and said, Yes, that was the thing to do, quite.

'Well then,' said Arpad, 'if that's settled, what about this other thing: how would you like to live in the country? I'd like to build a small house in the country, near a golf-course, and have our own tennis-lawn and garden, you see. And I could motor up to the office daily. What say?'

Veronica dreamed deliriously of the country house for weeks and invented letter-boxes for its peerless white gate. The site was bought – it was near a river in Hertfordshire – the plans were approved, the foundations laid, and then, just at that stage, Veronica realized that by some mishap she had unwittingly broken their agreement – she was sure she was going to have a baby. For some time she dreaded to make this known to her husband, and when she did tell him he was petulant, and was prepared to do anything to prevent this infringement of their designs.

'Upon my soul, Veronica, we shall be dished, simply. The house is costing fabulous money. The mortgage, you know – I shall never be able to clear that mortgage. Why, why? O damn it all, I must take you to see a doctor.'

The doctor would do nothing for them, but later on Arpad bethought him of the Cory-Andrews, a wealthy couple, friends of his, who had longed in vain for offspring. To them he narrated Veronica's predicament and they immediately offered to adopt the child as soon as it was born – or say a month after. O, indeed, they would be most charmed and grateful.

'What do you think of their offer?' Arpad asked his wife. 'We must talk it over.'

Veronica folded her hands across her knees and said for her part she left the matter entirely to him.

'Let us talk it over,' said he, 'nothing immodest about it. Of course it is for you to decide, but for my part I say Yes. O certainly Yes,' Arpad intoned, 'because, you see, I am not a philoprogenitive man, and you're not that kind of girl at all. No sense in being sentimental or unreasonable. Nature plays the devil when she has you in her grip. The whole history of Society is one everlasting conflict with nature, and we have to deny ourselves, adapt ourselves. Nothing unnatural in that. There is a time and place for everything, and this is awkward for us. Of course a child is an awful expense. I might have to stop building that house. Now, what do you say? Can I tell the Cory-Andrews that you agree?'

Veronica unfolded her hands and said she supposed that *was* the thing to do, quite.

So they went on building the little house in the country, and for some months nothing clouded the delightful life Veronica and Arpad shared together. There was no need for her to occupy herself in making garments, she had no aptitude or fancy for that art, and the Cory-Andrews were providing everything. Kindness itself they were. O, beautiful people – said Arpad – immensely rich. They were going to pay all the expenses, and the child would be like their own, their heir. In fact it *would* be

absolutely their own – Arpad said – it was a contract, sacred though not sealed.

In the spring, Veronica did not play golf or tennis, for Arpad was concerned about her condition now it was so noticeable. Perhaps he was ashamed of it, or of himself, and he preferred to go golfing without her now. For example: he was not very keen to-day, but he had promised to play Johnny Planter a round.

'To be sure,' said Veronica. 'Why not?'

Off went Arpad and met Planter at the golf-house. Two very deliberate players, Smith and Brown, were there just before them, so Quass and Planter sat on the verandah waiting until they got well ahead.

'What is that fellow Brown?' Quass said to Planter, and Planter said to Quass: 'Brown? He's a bill-broker.'

'And Smith?'

'Something on the railway.'

'O, railway! What sort of a job can one get on a railway, Johnny?'

'I . . . really . . . well, I can't tell you; I don't know, I never did know,' said Planter. 'And how is your wife?'

'O very very well, considering,' replied Arpad, 'very well. She mopes a little: trying time for her now, can't get out and about much, and of course I can't be with her always. She weeps a good deal, that sort of thing.'

'Yes, yes,' said Johnny Planter, 'they do. Women are very curious.'

'O, very curious! But upon my dinky she weeps for hours, weeps for joy, for woe, for two pins, or for nothing at all – but there's a lot of it. Very trying, you know.'

'D'ye like my new sweater?'

'It's the sweet thing, Johnny. And did you tell me – is it really a dark red silk you have put on your coat?'

'I . . . no. It's . . .'

'A light red!'

'Well, yes.'

'You don't think that hurts the coat, Johnny?'

Planter shook his head, and Arpad continued: 'What is the origin of the word coat?'

'Ha!' laughed Planter. 'I don't know that. It is very hard to tell.'

'Humph! a simple word like that. Strange, you know; must have had an origin.'

'Yes, it is rather odd. Very odd.'

'Did I tell you I was over at George Frimpton's last week?'

'I heard you were.'

'Ah, I met your friend there, yes.'

'Molly told me she met you.'

'D'ye know, Johnny, she's extraordinarily nice, but I thought – only occasionally, you know – I thought her rather – rather disconcerting.'

'Ah, ha! yes?' Planter was triumphantly interested.

'She is a wee bit inclined,' continued his friend, 'to cut up the conversation . . . in watertight com-

partments . . . you know? . . . She does not let it flow naturally . . . she keeps saying: "O, you think that, do you?" . . . and of course that finishes everything. It does not flow at all. But she's very sweet.'

Johnny Planter looked confusedly pleased, and his friend continued: 'When she smiles, I think, you know, she shows her upper gums a little.'

'Ah? But most of us do that, don't we?'

Quass said to Planter: 'I *never* do.' And Planter said to Quass: 'Smile!' So Quass smiled, and Planter howled: 'Yes, yes you do, there's quite a gap.'

'Come on,' said Arpad, rising. 'Let's begin now.'

They began. Planter was in one of his most dazzling moods and led by six up at the turn, but thence on, Quass's British grit enabled him to storm through a miraculous game and win by a hole.

'Good for you,' murmured Planter, the sunny smile on his face only partially masking a decapitating fury. 'Splendid!'

'O, a sweet game, Johnny, upon my dink! Shan't forget that for a long time. Nor you either, eh, Johnny! You played a great game, but I had a little luck. Had my back to the wall, you know, saw Hell yawning – nothing I love better. O, it was a sweet game.'

Arpad returned home exultantly exhausted. At night, as they lay in their beds, he gave Veronica a minute history of each hole. Veronica was sleepy

but she listened, and at the end of it she said: 'Arpad, listen. I heard of a woman to-day who laid her baby on a hot-water bottle and scorched its little face!'

'What for?' her husband asked.

'She forgot it, you see, Arpad.'

'That's horribly silly,' said he, yawning, 'but I suppose it's easily done. You're just as likely to do it as anyone else.'

'O, Arpad! No, never, never!' Veronica was amazingly fervent.

'Well, I hope not,' said he, and then fell asleep.

In the middle of the night he was awakened by her piteous weeping.

'Is that you, Veronica? What . . . what is it?'

His wife sobbed out: 'O, you must not say such cruel things to me. Of course I would not do it.'

Quass uttered an exasperated sigh: 'Do! Do what? What is the matter? What cruel things?'

'That I should burn its face,' she moaned.

'What do you mean, burn its face? What face?'

'On a hot-water bottle,' sobbed Veronica. 'You know I would not. I never would. You must not say such things.'

'O lord, lord! All right, now go to sleep. I'm tired as a horse.'

'Yes, I will.' Veronica lay down quietly again. 'It *is* silly of me!'

A little later Quass heard her calling across to him in whispers: 'Arpad! Arpad!'

'Upon my soul,' he groaned, 'was ever a man so . . . so . . . blighted!'

'Arpad, I can't sleep. May I come over into your bed?'

'I suppose so . . . if you want to. But don't get too close to me, I'm in a raging fever, I'm scorching to death.'

He heard Veronica throw back the quilt. Then he was shocked to hear a loud bump upon the floor.

'God, what is the matter now?'

'Nothing!' She was giggling outrageously, vulgarly. 'I've only fallen out of bed!'

Quass ground his teeth while she lay on the floor bubbling with hysterical laughter. Soon she got up, but returned to her own bed, and save for an outburst of giggling now and then she did not trouble him any more.

The time came when Arpad motored her over to a nursing home in Kent and with anxious tenderness left her there. For two days the hospital was harassed by his hourly telephonic inquiries.

'No, sir, not yet,' the nurse would reply. 'No, she is very well. No, it is quite normal. No, I won't forget to ring you immediately.'

It was a large cool mansion set in a large shaded garden from which there was a vista of hills to be seen. In the hall was a grey sofa, with a helmet, a hauberk, and a battle-axe neatly engraved, symbolic arms against a sea of trouble too real to be decorative. On the warm side of the house a verandah was

occupied by a dozen or more cradles each filled with a babe and docketed with a label bearing a name. There they lay, half of them weeping all day, the other half all night. Soon there was another cradle with a new label Baby Quass. The Cory-Andrews had asked to be allowed to christen the infant themselves, and when they arrived together Mr. Cory-Andrews crossed out the word *Baby* and scribbled *Peter*.

'Ha, ha! the little beggar!' cried that amiable gentleman. 'That will help him to mind his P's and Q's. My crackers, Veronica! But he is a beauty. Peter! Peter! Peter! What do you think? When we got the news on the telephone Milly collapsed; yes, we were at dinner, and she collapsed.'

'I did indeed,' said his wife. 'I nearly drowned in my soup.'

As Veronica was so soon to part from it, it was considered unwise for her to suckle the child at all, but she insisted on feeding it from the bottle herself. Almost every day Arpad travelled down to see her, and he seemed to love peering at the new brilliance of Veronica's breasts, white as a peeled wand and richly changed from the small orbs of her customary appearance. Twice a week the Cory-Andrews came, and it was easy to see that they already loved the child, Veronica's child, their child. The mother was well, but lived most happily in the short periods that Peter was allowed to lie in her arms.

In due time Veronica was convalescent and then

spent most of her hours in the hospital garden. It was Eden, a peaceful place, shaded with pretty flowering trees all blooming in their spring finery. The garden plots were tended with genial carelessness by a hatchet-faced man with one arm, and a hook and a pipe perched exactly in the middle of his thin lips. The three or four lawns were not unduly cropped, their verdure was pied with daisies and the acacia bloom that dropped and lay upon the grass like dead white bees. Veronica drowsed and heard the cuckoo's cry. Or a rook perching high on a twig of poplars would sway and converse unamiably with the rest of nature. Tears would come strolling from Veronica's eyes. It was as if she had traversed a dark cavern of time and emerged into a light that bloomed over the Hesperides. O halcyon days! So lovely! To lie there and never move again! But the words of a stupid old song kept sauntering through her mind:

When the fields are white with daisies
I'll return.

Yes, there was something that would return, something she no longer desired, but what it was lay for the present beyond the reach of her mind. At noon a nurse would bring the lovely young Peter to be fed, and Veronica would feed him.

One of the nurses was a Scotch woman, with a sallow face, habitually sallow; and as though that was not cruel enough it was shiny, permanently shiny. You could not care very much for a woman like that

– Veronica couldn't. And this nurse had the religion of some bleak heterodoxy, though something sometimes gave a gush of warmth to her piety and then down she would plump beside a patient's bed and pray. It was told of her that once, while she was training in a slum hospital, she assisted at the birth of a certain poor woman's child. And the child just breathed, and then it died.

'By St. Antony,' said the medical student – a bit of a wag, 'the little fellow just missed his connection. Pity he wasn't baptized.'

'Sir!' Nurse McKay was deeply distressed and wept. 'Woe on the puir body!' She fetched a pint of water and a Prayer Book and was soon by way of preaching the young doctor into baptizing the dead child.

'No, no. No, no.' The doctor was scandalized.

'Go on!' she commanded.

'What 'ull we call it?' he grumbled. 'And this isn't holy water neither.'

'Alexander,' said Nurse McKay, and she found him the place in the Prayer Book.

'I can't read all this. You know I haven't time and it is not the proper thing to do.'

'Go on!' said she. So he went on and baptised 'thee, Alexander, in the name of the Holy Catholic Church.'

Nurse McKay mumbled and wept – she was its godmother; the doctor protested he was a Supralapsarian – but he was its godfather. And O, there was

the devil to pay later on when the mother heard of it; she was indeed ungrateful. For one thing she was a woman of some force of mind and speech, though her husband was only a bus-conductor. She was sulky one time, but then she became acrimonious to the nurse and worse to the doctor, and her husband went into one of his tantrums. 'For,' says he, 'as I understand it the child's got to have a funeral now.'

'Och! A Christian burial it must have, puir bairn,' said Nurse McKay sternly.

'And where shall I get the Christian money from?' he bawls. 'There was no need; it was senseless, it was dead.'

'It was not born dead,' Nurse McKay reminded him.

'It was baptized dead,' says he. 'Why couldn't you leave well alone! I'm a poor man with not twopence to my holy name. Why d'ye go vexing up trouble on me like this?'

Ah, terrible! But perhaps it was not true. Yet the Scotch nurse did look like a woman it might happen to, and Veronica could not care for her.

Sometimes her own bud of mortality lay in Veronica's arms; and though it was blind as a mole, weak as a worm, uttered no agreeable sounds, and was so intolerably undistinguishable that Veronica often wondered whether this was really her Peter or had the nurse muddled him up with those others, yet she could not forbear blissfully murmuring over

its pouting mouth and round head that reminded her of an armorial dolphin:

'My lovely little tiny boy.' And she would keep on murmuring and repeating this.

For the remainder of her term, between sleeping and eating, she read a long Russian novel which Ida Paragreen had brought her: *Anna Karenina* by Count Tolstoy. Veronica thought it an intensely moving story, and though Arpad seldom read books she told him he should read it, and so he took it away to do so.

Veronica lay at the nursing home for a month, and a few days before she left her husband spoke to her in the garden and told her of the final arrangements he had made with the Cory-Andrews. They were bringing a nurse to the home on the day Veronica left. The child was to go with them. Arpad looked so handsome in the plus-four suit of misty blue with the saffron vest, and his rich voice vibrated so eloquently you heard its softest syllable all over the garden.

'But don't you love him?' Tears came strolling into Veronica's eyes and grief trembled into her voice.

'O, splendid!' replied her husband. 'It's a real topper, a clip of the right bunch, top of the bunch. The Cory-Andrews are enchanted with it, simply.'

'But don't you love him?'

'O my word! Why, good lord . . . !'

'I want to keep him,' Veronica said.

'I wish we could. I'd love to, my dear, positively.'

'Yes?' Veronica said.

'But of course it can't be done now, it's too late; everything is fixed and agreed.'

'O no, O no; let us keep him!'

'I'm sorry, Veronica. You know as well as I that everything is settled. Besides, you would tire of it very soon. They are a ghastly bother, and when they grow up they are ungrateful and go to the dogs their own way . . .'

'But I want to tell you – I can't give him up.'

'Of course, Perry, you'll see it now and again, often in fact.'

'I just feel,' said she, 'as if you were selling him, like you would a lamb.'

'Na, na, na, na, Veronica. Don't say that, please don't say that, Veronica.'

'But you are.'

'That's unfair of you, and you know it! You agreed: didn't you agree? You were willing: weren't you willing? Upon my soul, it's rotten.'

'You've no love for him – or me. O, why did we ever beget him?'

'If it comes to that . . . well, well; upon my sammy! You do not understand my feelings, let me tell you, Veronica. They are as strong as yours, if not stronger. Probably much stronger. You do not enter into them at all, you consider only yourself. This is a great wrench for me, but look what it does for the child: magnificent home, riches, luxury,

education, Winchester, Cambridge, heir to a fortune . . .'

'Arpad! I wish I could have him.'

'But I keep telling you! We are pledged, pledged in honour, we are deeply bound. It would be dastardly to break with the Cory-Andrews now, foul; it cannot be done.'

'I think I shall die,' Veronica said. Her voice was low, but there was no tremor in it and the tears were gone from her eyes.

Two days later the house doctor himself spoke to Veronica's husband deprecatingly about the arrangement, but only succeeded in annoying Arpad. He was a small man with large spectacles and an infuriating blandness.

'Upon my word, it is very kind of you to take so much interest in this matter, but . . .' snapped Quass.

'Your wife is my patient,' gently interposed the doctor.

'Just so. And I'm obliged to you. But you must understand we are too deeply pledged to back out of this matter now, and therefore it is better to get the trouble settled at once, right away. If I were in battle and had my hand disabled and there was no doctor available I would cut off my hand myself.'

'That would be a ridiculous thing to do.' The doctor genially grinned.

'It's my way,' grimly continued Arpad.

'It would probably be fatal.'

'And Mrs. Quass would do the same. I am sure.'

The doctor mused: 'I think she might. But why should you want to do it for her?'

'Now what do you mean by that?' blustered Arpad. 'I can't stand mysticism.'

The little man was superbly cool: 'I mean you are *not* in battle, there *is* a doctor here, and nobody wants a hand cut off. I know it is unwise, I fancy it is stupid, to separate mother from child.'

'But there is no constraint,' blared Quass, 'there is no constraint in the matter at all. What are you thinking of? Never has been, and won't be. My wife entered into this freely.'

'That,' the other explained, 'is the source of my uneasiness: she is a very courageous woman, very conscientious, and will stick to her bargain – if you call it that – until you let her off. And it may have consequences; I thought I would warn you.'

'What consequences?'

'I can't be definite, but a whole pot of ills – mental derangement, physical debility, nervous disease. . . .'

'Ach, the dear Lord!' growled Quass. 'And about the child? I don't suppose you know anything of the basis of that arrangement with the Cory-Andrews?' Arpad triumphantly told the doctor of the unique advantages the child would gain by it: magnificent home, riches, luxury, education, Winchester, Cambridge, heir to a fortune. 'I can give it none of these things.'

'But you can,' the doctor placidly suggested, 'give

it a mother, and the less magnificent its home the better for the child. Luxury is excess of food and furniture and flunkeys; more neckties than you can ever wear; obesity, gout, boils under your arm. And if you want a fortune for it, what is the matter with *Mens sana in corpore sano*?'

''Pon my honour,' shouted the giant husband, 'you're just swilling with cranky fads, simply. Fresh air, ascetics, living on raisins, God's in His heaven – O, I abhor that kind. Now tell me: as a just man would you wish us to break our solemn pledge to the Cory-Andrews? I may be short-sighted, but I'm a man of my word; my word is sacred.'

Said the doctor: 'It may be a choice between breaking your word and breaking your wife's heart.'

'Pooh!' Quass sneered. 'I know all about broken hearts. Now tell me; I put it to you.' Quass stooped and plucked a daisy from the lawn. 'If you had this child's destiny in your hands' – Quass put the daisy in his mouth and bit off its head – 'what would you do? Now then!' – Quass spat the daisy out of his mouth.

'I believe,' said the smiling doctor, 'the Cory-Andrews are very kind.'

'That is so.'

'Good people. I expect – I am sure – they will shower parental blessings on your child, on little Peter.'

'That is so.'

'And therefore, if I had to choose between your-

self and them' – the doctor stroked the palm of his left hand musingly with his right forefinger – 'I believe I should choose as you are choosing.'

'Well, there you are then!' Quass was mollified.

'Yes,' the doctor continued. 'I am sure I should. But as things are I am merely your wife's medical adviser, and as such – why, then – I would see . . .' He paused for a moment, snapping his fingers as if seeking a definition.'

'Well?' bellowed Quass.

'Yes, yes,' the doctor answered brightly, smiling up at Arpad's bulk, 'I should hope I would see you damned!'

'Bah!' The frowning Quass stalked away. 'Insolence!' he said. 'Bah!' he said.

The very first day after she had left the home Arpad had again to reason out the matter with Veronica, and he argued finally. First he argued expansively:

'My dearest! You are young and beautiful and intelligent. You know we have to hold our way in life equally amongst duties and pleasures, make way by careful steps and avoid rash decisions, so that we may get the benefit of what is due to us and escape the pitfalls.'

Veronica said: 'Yes, but we could have little Peter.'

Whereupon Arpad argued succinctly: 'It is too late to talk like that now, you know that as well as I. What's done can't be undone.'

'But it can, it shall be!' Veronica screamed. 'I will go and fetch him now.'

Then Arpad had to argue loudly: 'How is it possible? This is worse than seven devils! How can you be so thoughtless? Don't be obstinate. Now, don't you be obstinate; forget it. Can't you see, it will pass.' He stalked up and down before the mourning girl. He picked up an ink-bottle from the bureau, and shook it. 'This ink is bad,' he said, and set it down upon the hearth. 'Where is my card-case?' Veronica found him his card-case.

'Perhaps, later on?' she whimpered.

'Yes! yes! Now be reasonable! Why, Veronica!' But his petting and fondling gained him no response.

That was the last time they discussed the child. Veronica folded in upon herself, brooded and ailed, but never again did she make the request of him. The Cory-Andrews took the child abroad, to Italy; the child was well and flourishing. To Veronica it had died. Other things had died to her; she was Arpad's wife, mother of lost little Peter, but she was no longer a lover, and barely a friend. To her resentful conception he had none of the fondness of love for her, she did not mean anything to him, she was just a nourishing accessory – the roll he crumbled beside his dinner plate. Women were always tortured by the men they loved, they were all Anna Kareninas. Her husband had read that book, and he disliked it: the morals were horrible, the people perverse and disgusting, and Tolstoy was a monster

ever to have written it. And whenever Veronica's unresponsiveness checked him, or her meek familiar eyes reminded him of the shattering wound, he blamed 'that fellow Tolstoy' for the change in her, her moods, her coldness, her altered fancies and her deadened fire. There was no such change in him, he was more considerate than ever, more desiring, more in love. Secretly he read much of the book again, for Veronica had declared there was 'something of every woman' in it, but he found nothing resembling his Veronica there. There was that fool of a woman who flung herself under a train out of spite, sheer spite! At times, in a baffled rage, he would exclaim: 'O, curse that fellow Tolstoy!'

Their new house was furnished in August and Veronica rose rather listlessly to the diversion of furnishing it. Arpad hoped the change of neighbourhood would usher in the magic change of spirit he desired. That the uncomplaining Veronica was ill did not present any colour of fact to his sense of their situation; she was just sullen. He was wise enough to perceive this, and he was man enough to allow that mood – which he could understand, though she could never justify it – to exhaust its bane, to wait until the day of her surrender: 'Beloved, I have been foolish, I have been unfair to you. You were right. Forgive me!' And though at times he had been bitterly, if silently, resentful, he would forgive – he knew. Often she would retire to be in some room alone, and there one day he overheard her singing

quietly to herself. He paused. That was queer, he had never heard her sing before:

Clap hands! clap hands!
For papa has come,
With plums in his pocket
For baby alone.

Faugh! What foolishness! But he crept noiselessly away.

The new house was not large, but it was bright-coloured, its appurtenances were ingenious, and at the end of the long sylvan slope down to the river a tiny shed guarded a sweet little boat, labelled Veronica. On Sunday they rowed a long way on the river and at noon, when they landed in a field to eat pie, Veronica was timid of the cows that assembled to gaze at them.

'Upon my soul!' protested Arpad, 'but what could a cow do to anybody? They are the most harmless things in nature.'

Then they were pestered by wasps.

'Don't mind them at all!' cried he. 'If you ignore them they won't sting you. They are the most harmless things in creation.'

A wasp settled upon his hand. 'There, look at this one! You see, perfectly harmless!' The wasp sat quite still as Veronica watched it. Suddenly Arpad gave a yell. 'Curse it!' he cried, and smashed the offending wasp with his other hand. Veronica smiled at her husband.

'Something must have tickled the beastly thing,' he explained.

And then a wasp settled on Veronica's face. Veronica kept quite still. The wasp walked to the bridge of her nose, but she did not move an eyelash. Arpad was alarmed but made no sign. The wasp descended to the tip of Veronica's nose; with oblique gaze she watched the little miscreant until, satisfied or disappointed, it flew away.

'Bravo! O bravo!' shouted Arpad. 'Didn't I tell you?'

Veronica pretended it was nothing, but she could not help blushing with pride. Arpad took this for a sign of the coming thaw.

'Let us shift out of this,' he said, 'there are too many here, it's a nuisance.'

They began to cross the rough pasture, a field lumbered with tots of briar hung with blackberries, and as they strolled along Veronica gave a shriek and clutched his arm. A snake lay before them slowly undulating with its head hidden in the grass; the yellow-brown thong of its body was nearly a yard in length; it had not seen them.

'All right! all right!' adjured Arpad, 'it's harmless, don't be afraid, it's just a grass snake.'

So Veronica turned and watched the snake, and the slow ripple flowing along its yellow-brown body that died out at the tip of its tail and was followed by another ripple.

'Snakes have no ears,' said he, 'they are deaf. It

is a harmless one, we could pick it up by its tail.'

'Pick it up!' said Veronica.

Her husband shook his head: 'I don't like touching them.'

'Afraid?' questioned she.

'No, no, of course not. It's harmless. But I don't like such things as mice and earwigs and frogs. Same with snakes. They're repellent.'

'I'd like to see all of it,' Veronica whispered.

''Fraid you can't,' said Arpad.

Veronica stooped, snatched up the snake by its tail and held it out at arm's length.

'God! drop it, drop it!' yelled Arpad, backing away. The snake, head down, wriggled convulsively, but Veronica smiled. It could not curl up to reach her hand. In a moment or two she had flung it from her and, still smiling, turned to her husband. The snake vanished like a thread of lightning.

'Come away, you fool!' snapped Arpad, and they hurried back to the boat and rowed away. Veronica's face was now pale as wax.

'What's the matter? Aren't you well?' he asked her.

'I feel . . . a little sick,' confessed she.

He dug the oars angrily in the water: 'Reaction. Shouldn't have done it!' he shouted.

'But you said it was harmless.'

'It was an absurd thing to do.'

'Why?'

'Might have been venomous. You can never be sure. I don't know much about snakes.'

They said no more about it, and he rowed on in silence, feeling desperately annoyed by the incident. She had not done it out of bravado, he was sure she had done it just to 'show' him. Lord, but she was still antagonistic; it was the kind of thing that Anna Karenina and all her tribe would do.

On they fared, drifting in silence past hot pastures covered with ragwort and shorn acres ranked with clustered sheaves. Soft warm winds washed their languor on the heavy trees; time swung its silken hammock, and Veronica lay in it dreaming. With no obvious reference her husband astonishingly said in a loud voice:

'There are no dragons in China now!'

But Veronica was thinking of the child that had never warmed her breasts. It was in Italy. And she began to hum the tune of:

Clap hands! clap hands!
For papa has come,
With plums in his pocket . . .

Arpad dashed the oars into the water again; they grunted in the rowlocks, their blades heaved and dripped; his wife, sitting before him, swayed to and fro at every powerful lunge.

'What has become of the dragons?' she asked.

It was unfortunate that Veronica did not come to

care for the new neighbourhood. The inhabitants were indifferent, were cold, they seemed to have all the friends they wanted. Arpad was not affected by this, for he always found friends where he pleased. Winter or summer, he was a fine fellow. Undoubtedly he was perplexed by this new Veronica, and often he was annoyed and scornful. But he was never more annoyed than on an autumn day of that same year, a vile memorable day. There was fog everywhere, fog in the roads, the fields, the houses and the railway stations. It choked mankind, it disgusted the earth and the complexities above and below it, for the sky was a desert, birds were silent, trees wept, and the pavements steamed. Towards evening the fog waned, but day beneath that rancorous cloud set like a wound, and its memory was a wound for ever.

Veronica had gone to the station with a little packed bag. Why had she gone? Why? And as she stood on the platform she had been swept off in some incomprehensible way by an incoming train, and killed. An accident, bitter and unaccountable, mysterious and tragic, but an accident; a pure, pure accident.

Quass was cloven to the soul by the fearful news.

'O . . . the hell . . . Veronica! Blast that fellow Tolstoy!' were the first words he said.

RIFKI

In a little street off Heinestrasse lived a prosperous tradesman of Vienna, Shulim Jellinek, a young Jew. Shulim had married the daughter of a man who made peppermint, but he himself was a barber and therefore, soon, under his tuition, his lovely and beloved wife Rifki had become a hairdresser and a manicurist too, who did things in his saloon to ladies' hair and to the finger-nails of gentlemen who were studious of their appearance and proud of their pointed shoes. In aspect Shulim was not so chaste as these, for he wore an Ethiopian look and by the misfortune of life it invariably but untruthfully seemed as if he had not shaved for three days. Otherwise quite nice, artless and handsome. A gold tooth shone assuringly in his mouth, there was nearly always a wooden toothpick stuck in his right ear, and the fat small finger of one pale soft hand bulged with the very devil of a corrupting signet ring, a ring that a body-snatcher would have made a secret note of. In hot weather he wore cream duck trousers and purple socks. No saloon was more popular than his saloon; it was full of mirrors and perfumes and little cabins where the gentlemen sat holding out their hands to Rifki, and smiling at her; and Shulim was an astute man who believed in everything he said although he seldom said the same thing twice about anything. He seemed, therefore, to be in accord with the opinions of all, which was

wise of him, for only by subduing the flesh of egotism and accommodating himself to the spirit of others could he become a successful man; and then there was still left for realization the private fact of himself; his life, ambitions, potentialities, opinions, and desires were still there to interest him and Rifki. In a word, a shrewd man of business, but – a flatterer and a liar. In other words, having a picturesque mind he could not bring himself to control the crooked direction it so picturesquely took, and he held it for truth that provided there was enough honey in your flattery, a lie would never turn upon the stomach. Dreadful – but so! Why are people made this way? If flattery is stupid and a lie is evil why are such things so important – and useful? And then Rifki would tell him that this was very true, that he was so clever, there was no one like him on earth.

'It is the same with the Danube, Rifki,' he would aver. 'The river flows under the bridge, but does the bridge follow it? Learn from this, Rifki, that the bridge is yourself, the river is the stream of life; you are contrary to it, but you are of no use unless the river flows; you stand astride and contrary, but you must not impede the stream. Is it not so? Then let it flow.'

'Shulim,' says Rifki, 'you are the most clever chap in the whole of the earth, O yes.'

'Fine!' he cries. 'And you are so beautiful as the Queen of China. In a hundred years I could not cease to love you.'

'So, Shulim?' says Rifki. 'But yet you are a great liar, and you are a great fool for a man so clever as you.'

And Shulim, who had a mind like a conjurer's hat, it contained so many astonishing and unexpected secret things, thought within himself, 'Ah, yes, this woman is sensible enough,' thought deeply within himself, 'but she is not sensible enough to be spoken sensibly to.'

To instruct her now would be unwise, for soon she was going to bear their firstborn, a young Jellinek – O pomegranates and lilies! – a man of five hundred thousand – O trumpets of Jehovah! a lion of Judah – and at such times women must be humoured and petted and endured, or what would become of us all?

And Rifki, who was lovely and plump and divinely dark, in time bore the child. And they called it Louis, son of Shulim, the barber who dwelt in a little street off Heinestrasse and was accounted wise. So now, old and young Jellinek, son Louis and father Shulim; and the hope of the elder was to foster the cult of barberhood in the soul of this his offspring. But Herr Jellinek foresaw that at the age of eighteen his son would be called upon to become a soldier, and he would have willy-nilly to perform the military service that the fatherland imposed for a while upon all its sons. And that was obnoxious to Jellinek *père*, for he – O harp of Zion! – was a peaceful man. Also he was accounted wise, wisdom and peace were his enviable accords. How then to

avert – by the fairest means he could devise – here and now, while his son had advanced but a few days towards it, that ultimate calamity?

'Hallo, Rifki,' he called softly, coming to her bedside and sitting there and stroking her hand; 'I have thought of something, Rifki.'

'Shulim, tell me,' said she.

'I have thought of something. To-morrow I shall to the authorities go and register the little one as if he had been born two years. Two years ago, I shall say, my little son was born.'

'But why will you do this, Shulim?'

'Because,' he replied, 'when the time comes for him to be taken for a soldier it will *seem* that he is eighteen years of age, but he will *really* be only sixteen, and his limbs will be small and his courage not good and his strength but as the strength of a little bird; and so the captains will say: "Bah, who is this puny creature? Send him back home, we do not want him, he is no man!" Is it not so, Rifki?'

'Ach, yes, of course,' Rifki was content that this should be so.

'I shall say that you have been in a foreign land and have but just brought him home. What do you think of this, Rifki?'

'A foreign land?' mused she. 'I think it was good, yes, very good.'

And so it passed for a day, and Herr Jellinek was so elated that he nearly shaved off the nose of a man he had always mistrusted though he beamed upon

him with smiles. But the next day he came to his wife's bedside.

'Hallo, Rifki, hallo! I have thought of something – we cannot make that mistake of his age.'

'Can you not?' said she.

'No,' he said, 'because little Louis is bound to go to a school when he is six years old. But then he will really be only four years of age – do you see? – and very backward for a child who is supposed to be of six. Everybody will say: "What is this? O the stupid boy, such a duffer! Whose child can this be, so foolish, and so weak?" His companions will oppress him and beat him, he will be so small – and of course it is impossible. Is it not so, Rifki?'

'Ach, yes, of course.'

'What do you think of this, Rifki?'

Rifki pulled the milky nipple from her son's lips and fondled him with her cheek.

'I think it's a great shame, yes, very shameful,' said she.

'Ah,' Shulim thought within himself, 'this woman is sensible enough, but not sensible enough to be spoken sensibly to.'

And so it passed for another day, but in the morning he came to her again.

'Hallo, Rifki, I have thought of something.'

'Ah, Shulim, tell me,' said she.

'I shall not to the authorities go until two years hence, and then I shall register the little one as if he was just born – then.'

'So?' murmured Rifki, 'but why?'

'Listen,' Shulim said. 'When he goes to school for six years old he would then really be eight years old, and very forward and bright for a child of six, and everybody will say: "Oi, who is this? What a clever child, what a scholar! Whose child can he be, so forward, so bright, so ingenious?" Is it not so, Rifki?'

'Ach, yes, of course, Shulim, of course.'

'What do you think of this, Rifki?'

'Shulim, you are the most clever chap in the world.'

And so it passed for a day, and for two days; then he came to his wife once more.

'Hallo, Rifki! I have thought of something. This will not do again; we cannot make the mistake of his age.'

'So?' asked Rifki.

'Have you forgot the military? For when he will appear to be eighteen he will really be twenty, and they will take him into the army at once – he will look so good and strong and advanced for his age. "Who is this well-built fellow? He is magnificent," they will say, and they will never let him go again, never, no.'

'They will make him a general?' suggested Rifki.

'Bah, no!' cried her husband, and he thought within himself: 'This woman is sensible enough, but . . .' Aloud he said: 'Can you not see, we are undone, Rifki, flummoxed! O, I do not know what

to do or which way to turn; at school he will be eaten alive, and in the army he will be scourged and ruined. It is cruel, a barbarous country, fraud and misfortune everywhere; it is terrible. What can a man do for this? Tell me, what can be done now?'

Rifki took the child to her breast and suckled him. She leaned smiling at that little nuzzling soldier for a long while and then she said to her husband: 'I have thought of something.'

'Rifki, tell me,' said he.

'Well then, Shulim, why do you not register him of his right age?'

Well, so it comes to every man, the time when he learns the gods have forsaken him; his soul is a darkness, the oracle is dumb, he is no more or less than the fool he was born to be. Thus it was now, and Herr Jellinek could only exclaim: 'O, Rifki, but you are so clever! Just imagine, I never thought of that!'

THE APE AND THE ASS

IN THE OLD DAYS BEFORE THE ROMANS AND JEWS, even before King Shrivelear, who had seventeen wives each bigger than the other . . .

'How could that be?' the Ape asks.
'Let him be, it was so,' says the Ass.

. . . in those old days the world was smaller than now and full of its youth, for the world like a tree has to grow, though you cannot observe it, and on the top of it then you could see a wide moor, and a lake in the far corner with seven noble rivers flowing into it. The moor was green, the lake blue, and the world was without shadow. A sharp conical mountain made of crystal rose from the shore of the lake, and the Windmill of Time that never ceased turning stood on its summit as a sign to the world of the endless equilibrium of all things. Nothing that moved on feet could come or go on that crystal mountain, the very birds of the air shunned it, and yet immured on its top an ape and an ass lived beside the windmill and tended a well that sank down through a glassy pit to the centre of the world. Once every noon a bucket of bronze rose up filled, and the ass emptied it into a trough on the right-hand side of the mill; then the ass would lie down and sleep. Once every midnight the bucket at the end of its long black rustless chain rose again filled, and the ape emptied it into a trough on the left-hand side of the mill; then

the ape would lie down and sleep. Thus it had gone on for countless years, but one day the ape took a sip from the draught before he emptied it and found that it gave him the power of speech. He woke the ass and said to it: 'What is it you draw up from the well?'

The ass made no answer, for it could not speak, so the ape offered it some of the water. But the ass was a fool and only immersed his nose in the bucket.

'Drink!' the ape cried, but the ass could not understand him, and it took the ape countless years to teach him this business, but at last he drank.

'What is it you draw up from the well?' the ape then asked him again.

'I draw up life,' answered the ass, 'and I empty it into this trough that runs down the mountain side, and thus I beautify what is to come.'

'I draw up death,' the ape said, 'and I empty it into this trough that runs down the mountain side, and thus I beautify what is gone.'

The ass shook its head doubtfully.

'Do you not believe me?' the ape asked.

'No,' said the ass.

'I believe every word *you* utter,' the ape said. At this the ass gave a loud but pleasant bray.

'Why are you different from me?' the ape continued. 'Your voice is harsh and your appearance wild.'

The ass tossed its head proudly and said: 'My appearance is divine. I am white.'

'White!' the ape echoed, with a trimming of scorn to its tongue.

'And spotless,' said the ass. 'I am the whitest thing in the world, whiter than the froth of blue waves, whiter than a sheet bleaching on a faggot. I am whiteness. And my shoes,' it continued, glancing at its hoofs, 'are of silver.'

'One of the nails,' the ape said, 'is rusty.'

'Maybe so,' said the ass airily, 'but I cannot see it.'

'I am not like you,' the ape said. 'You behold in me the blackest thing in the universe; my outside is blacker than night, and within I am blacker than dreams of doom. I am very black.'

'I do not overmuch care,' said the ass, 'for the colour of your hinderparts.'

'That is as may be,' the ape replied, 'but they are invisible to me.'

For countless years they reasoned upon the sublimity of blackness and the divinity of whiteness, until one day the ass through excess of passionate argument overslept itself and the ape had to take its place. Their times of duty thus changed, the ass taking the midnight bucket and the ape the noon. Immediately time began to run backwards, the ape grew white, the ass turned black, and there is no saying to what cruel pass the world might have come had not another strange happening succeeded. The wind blew not, the mill turned not, and the bucket rose not again from the pit of the earth.

The two beasts gazed into the well.

'What now?' the white ape asked its companion, and the black ass replied: 'What now?'

'Ass,' the ape said, 'I shall go to the bottom of the well and find out the truth on't.'

'How go, Ape?'

For answer the ape sprang upon the well chain and vanished down sliding, and the moon wasted seven nights before the ass had news of him again. Then he heard his voice calling from the bottom of the well.

'Ass,' it cried. 'I am in the land of heaven. There is neither night nor day, but the trees are limp with nuts and the shells are of gold; they are full of milk and honey.'

'Bring, bring!' cried the ass, for when the mill stopped hunger and thirst had come upon them. Then he sank down into a sweet sleep and dreamed he was a herring floating in the seas to China. When he awoke the ape stood by him with a heap of gleaming objects at his feet. The ass stretched himself and rose and groaned: 'I love not these black shanks of mine. And,' he asked, giving a kick at the heap, 'what are these?'

The ape explained to him that they were the nuts of gold with honey in them and milk, so the ass asked him to crack some.

'Alack, friend,' the ape said, 'I am unable to do so; there is fear upon me.' Whereupon the ass lifted up its voice and brayed, not gently: 'Saw you ever the like of this! Where were you nurtured? Did you see no more, or is there nothing else in heaven but these pumpkins?'

'O, ay,' the doleful ape replied, 'there is something, but I tremble to speak of it.'

The ass lifted up its voice again, but the ape gently interposed: 'Nay, nay, friend, you are not to do that. Listen. At the bottom of the well was a thicket where these gourds grew in twilight. I passed out of the thicket, for I heard voices, and came into a plain full of green plants and sharp spines and leaves and purple plumes . . .'

The ass hung out its tongue and began to dribble.

' . . . and roving over them were figures like myself but no taller than a gourd. They were as white as I am, but smooth-skinned and beardless, and from their heels and wrists spread wings that thundered in flight like a bee's, and the hair upon their heads was a seeming coil of pale silent fire. I saw only this, for as I neared them they beat the green plants with their hands and feet so that a cloud of down flocked up and hid them.'

The ass drew in its tongue and champed its teeth together. It sidled over to the well-head and gazed into the depths, sniffing the air with mysterious longing. At that moment the giant pinions of the mill began to turn again, the air whiffled in its fans, and the winch revolved once more. Listlessly the ass lay down, while the ape continued its story.

'I fled after them in among those barbarous plants and beat up a cloud to cover me, but almost before I knew it they were behind me and beside me and over me, many, many, and as they grasped me I was

numbed. Their touch had made me void and voiceless, and I rolled on the air like a tuft on a wave. In this shape they haled me into the sky, and we went journeying over a field of beans a span high with a hare leaping in them, and thence on towards the mountain of the winds of time, which has a crater pouring the winds upon the world like smoke that rolled into clouds; some were torn in stripes, some twirled in foamy wreaths, and others curved into the petals of flowers, as they began their voyage.'

The ass, snoozing in sunlight, shifted its head and sighed gustily, but the ape composedly proceeded.

'We hovered over this crater until we were sucked by a downward draught spinning along its sides and swept into a chamber of dark rocks glowing faintly like dew in moonlight. There I saw the queen of these people, a being shaped like themselves but a hundred times more vast, reposing under a canopy of bitumen set with sapphires that twinkled in the light from the moon of her hair. They laid me before her and she brushed my helpless body with her wings, and I became heavy and was myself again. I stood up, and she demanded of me my business. Her voice was like a song, and her hair lit the black palace as a taper brightens a cranny. I am that ape – said I – who lives at the mill with my friend the ass, and I am seeking a lost pail. I told her more; I told her of our life here and our duty, but to my sorrow she only said – *Why, why do you do*

this foolish thing? Said I – Surely, madam, life and death depend upon our labours? That's what I said, Ass. She did not answer for many moments, and I heard only the movements of her people, the humming of their vexed wings. Then again her voice, like a song:

'*The water of life comes from the water of death and returns to it. The water of death comes from the water of life and returns to it. All is one. There is a difference in time, but no difference in them. All your labour is vain.*

'I did not understand this, and so she told me that the waters are all one, dipped from the same pool, and roll down the troughs back to the same pool again. Do you hear that, Ass! Think of it! And I was confounded, and asked her why, why, why was this foolish thing done.

'She gestured with her hand towards those others. *These are my people, my hours,* she said, *who cry the old customs up, for their age grows vulgar, they say. The wise are deceived, beliefs change, and doctrines die, but their symbols outlast them and these are cherished. The hours are born to die; and when one dies he is buried where none may ever find him, but so loved is his memorial that the still-living wear out their time in seeking it. You, too, are but symbols, dreams without a core that I had forgotten. Live on, if it please you.*

'I questioned no more. Let me go back – I begged – to my friend the ass; we are immured but content.

'*Go then*, she said, *but first pay scot for your trespass – twenty shekels.*

'I had neither purse nor pride – I told the queen – and at once she called her alms man to give me a shekel.

'*Take it*, said she, *that within the space of a day you may earn a profit of twenty.*

'I took the shekel; there was a hole in it, but it shone like silver and bore the queen's image; and with this I walked out of the palace into a city of caverns where there was no light of day but only a twilight of glimmering hair. I met none but those sorrowing with prayers on their lips hurrying to the booming of gongs, and little children without joy. All these passed by me as I went to the market-place. When I came there I saw no buying or selling; the needy sat on stools, and merchants came with baskets to give them what they lacked and thank them for the taking of it. I offered to carry some of the baskets, but the merchants asked me to pay them a shekel for doing so. This I would not do, and I went into a tavern where I saw men dicing, but always the dice fell evenly and none was a victor. Suffer me – said I. They gave me the dice, and I won a shekel from them. They were filled with wonder; they bowed prostrate before me, crying, *This is the only true god*. I cast again and won more shekels and more until I had gained twenty. Then the people crowded round me and hailed me joyously as the master of miracles, but as they touched me I immediately

became numb again and rose in the air like a feather. In that state I was conveyed to the palace once more and laid at the feet of the queen, who brushed me with her wings and I was whole again.

'I gave up the twenty shekels I had won, and the queen cried: *Justice is done; despise not the just!* Alas, I had erred greatly. There was much sullen murmuring amongst the people against me, and I was escorted to the shaft of the crater and there thrown into the winds. Immediately I was blown from the crater a hundred leagues into the air and then I found myself diving over and swooping down a great curve into the thicket of gourds.'

The ape drooped before his friend. 'Now here I am,' he said. The ass, sprawling beside the well, yawned at the ape's conclusion.

'Do you not believe me?' the ape dolefully murmured.

'What is belief?' the ass asked, shaking his head. 'Once I was white, then I was black, now I am white again! Do you see?'

'Why, so it is!' the ape cried.

'You see I am white again,' the ass repeated, 'whiter than the hair of time.'

'And I am black again, yes, blacker than the grave of every hour.'

'If I am not mistaken,' drawled the ass, 'there is still an aspect of you that is offensive to decency.'

With bowed head the ape sat disconsolately down beside the ass and in silence contemplated its own

feet. And now the sun was soaring right overhead above the mill's twirling fans. The moor below was green, the lake blue, and the earth was without shadow. It was noon, and they heard the chain rive on the winch as the bucket rose again to the well-head.

'Well, here we are,' bellowed the ass. 'So you found nothing but pumpkins!'

'Nay, I have this shekel,' the ape replied; 'the queen gave it me; there is a hole in it, look!'

The ass took the shekel between its teeth and ground it lightly to dust as if it were a shell.

'You see!' he said, swallowing the crumbs. 'That was a false coin.'

In wonderment the ape mused at this confutation. The ass rose and shook himself, took the risen bucket as of old, trotted with it to the right-hand trough and emptied it. Then he turned to the ape, and lifting up his head he brayed greatly.

THE MARTYRDOM OF SOLOMON

YEARS AGO IN ONE OF OUR UNIVERSITY TOWNS where there are always odd figures to be seen – some of them, indeed, unreasonably unusual – one of the queerest you might meet was a Galician professor, by name Solomon Gingl, whose face though round as an owl's had the smile of a child. At forty-five his dark moustache was fading and he had already the gait and many of the habits of an old man. His bowler hat, much decayed, was always planted well back on his round head; he wore spring-side boots, and as often as not the ends of his trousers, appropriately frayed, were caught upon the tags at the back of them. A black frockcoat clothed though it could not be said to adorn him, and in this shape the spectacled professor shuffled along the pavements, burbling to himself as people thought, but in reality conversing with things that had as it were an invisible existence, surrounding and ever attending him. Experiments in hypnotism and the art of inducting one's self into hypnotic states had left him so much the prey of that science that he was always having arguments and altercations with some unseen intangible embodiments of the ideas of his mind, but at the same time he was perfectly aware of the illusion of those things.

'Dose visions and voices, dey haund me, but – ha, ha! dey are notting, dey are nod genuine! No. How do I know dey are nod genuine? Because,' he

would cry with his genial cackle of laughter, 'dey have never said anyting original to me, never von little idea, never, dat vos nod already in my own mind. It is shoost my own brain working, statically, free of some restraind it vonce bossessed. I am half a loonateek: bevare off me, ha, ha!'

One afternoon in autumn he and his umbrella were ambling along to the quiet district in which his friends the Harbourmasters lived. At the corner of the square he stopped and blinked his eyes with pleasure. Vague gracious airs moved about the enclosure and sighed serenely in the trees. Lamps were just lighting up and the empty streets looked naked. An old bearded watchman leaned upon a barrier at a piece of upturned road; he had lit his magical scarlet lanterns, and was talking softly to a policeman. Trains could be heard clearly shunting some way off. In all the sky there was just one star more bright than any gem, though smaller than the eye of a needle.

'Dat vatchman,' murmured Solomon, 'has got a face like Jesus.'

Puffing and stumbling he mounted the many stairs to his friends' rooms.

'Vy do you inhabit dese mountains of der moon?'

Alfred Harbourmaster, the history-tutor, beamed and drew him by the hand into the drawing-room; Mrs. Harbourmaster beamed, and took his baggy umbrella from him. They were still young; their

cosy room had a cluster of yellow chrysanthemums in a bowl on the tiniest black piano. The professor sits down and soon, with a cup held perilously in one hand and a half-bitten crumpet clutched but forgotten in the other, he discourses upon his latest theories, for they are the things that university professors are begotten to enjoy.

Language – he is saying – is what retards the development of mind activities; or rather the absence of suitable language. Language does not keep pace with the needs of thought; often it only imperfectly gives expression to ideas of which we are clearly aware. For those ideas which lie just behind the mind of man, new thoughts waiting for interpretation, there is no medium of expression at all, one has to break down or leap over the barrier of language by which our awareness and intentions are surrounded and encumbered.

'I can transmid in many vays, by speech and by writing vords, the bare meaning of an idea. Vy nod transmid its intention, objectively? Ven I tink of a loaf of bread someting puts it into my head; vy does it nod put it into my hand?'

'You mean,' said Mrs. Harbourmaster, 'why can't man behave like God!'

'No! I mean vy *doesn't* he! Vy *doesn't* he behave like God?'

'Fear, I suppose,' suggested Harbourmaster, reflectively tapping a sponge cake with a spoon, always ready to humour his friend's eccentricities.

'No, no!' exclaimed the professor, 'nod fear! It is because he shoost has nod got the convincing avareness vich is necessary. He may have dis power, I tink he may have dis power. Nod, nod fear: he is nod afraid of a loaf of bread; it is nod actualities at all dat man is afraid of, it is only unrealities – ghosts, demons, ha! ha! ha! Der greatest benefactor of mankind vos der von who invented ghosts; yes, yes, we belief in ghosts because if we discovered dat we were afraid of The Nothing, just nothing, we could nod survive, we should be driven to our insanity, ha! ha!'

Mrs. Harbourmaster took his cup from him. He had dropped the crumpet into it, and splashed his trousers.

'Some of this cake?' she suggested, holding a plate before him.

He peered at the cake with the closest attention.

'Vot is in it, please?'

'There is sugar.'

'Ach, no, I vill nod.'

'And butter and eggs . . .'

'No, tank you.'

'And ginger.'

'Ach, no tank you, I will nod. I vill haf some of dis beautiful bread. I vill now tell you a dream – just once I had dis dream, just once I had it.'

'Is it important that you only dreamed it once?'

He deliberated: 'Yes; nod for noding is dat feeling of fear to dream a bad dream three times. Look

you, a dream may be a memorandum lying dormant in the mind of God. Descartes, you may remember, is shoost a little inclined to dat view.'

In his dream the professor saw the world split suddenly into two halves. He was strolling, bareheaded for some absurd reason, along Ealing Broadway when the cataclysm occurred. The earth split almost at his very feet, and one half of the living world was swept instantly away, down into a vast nothing. And as he stood there, with eternal space yawning beneath, a tram from Shepherd's Bush dashed past him, and shot over the edge in a great curve, twirling like a child's rattle, into the abyss. What moved him most profoundly was a bowler hat, exactly like his own which he had not got with him; it belonged to a man sitting on top of the tram, and was blown up by some vast current of air and deposited at his very feet. He had picked it up and put it casually upon his head. It did not fit him, so he unfolded the lining and discovered there a paper with some writing upon it.

'What was the writing?' cried his two hearers.

'O, it was very obscure, I can never interpret this writing. It said: *My trumpets shall blow from a cloud.* Meaning!' he cried in response to their question, 'I do nod know, but it may be a memorandum. I dream dis, and vot is a dream but an idea in the mind of God? Of course anything might happen to the whole universe if God could commit suicide, but dat is the von ting He could nod do. He is not an

entity, but shoost a relation, like time and space. Let us call Him the meaning of time, the inspiration of matter.'

There was a pause.

'Vot did I do with dat crumpet?' he asked, looking upon the floor. Mrs. Harbourmaster ministered to him and he resumed.

How far had he tested this conception? Had he made any experiments? Well, there had been experiments. Perhaps he was on the verge of a discovery. To destroy was always easier than to create; not yet could he call anything into existence by an effort of the mind and will, but it might soon be possible to accomplish the *destruction* of something by such means. He was hopeful that he would shortly be able to disintegrate the atoms composing a living identity. Creation was a long way off, but one might be a destroyer.

'An unknown, unseen destroyer!' exclaimed Mrs. Harbourmaster. 'How horrible!'

'Well, it must be the power that leads to creation, it is half way. Tink of it! You might live for ever, independent of time and fate.'

'It is too terrifying,' replied she. 'No human good could come from the exercise of such a faculty, even if it were possible. It is so sinister. If I understand you rightly you could even "will" the death of a man.'

'Yes,' said Gingl, 'dat is vot I tink is possible.'

'O dear, dear Mr. Gingl, don't practise on Alfred,

will you?' cried Mrs. Harbourmaster, with mock terror.

'Do not suggest it, please, please!' shouted Gingl. There was silence for a few moments, and he continued very seriously:

'Dat is de awful feature. One develops dis power of de devil or of Gott, but you have no control over the intentions of your mind, no, no, you cannot persuade your mind to act in a rational way. In such a connection it is important not to suggest any such ting, please. For if you try to suppress such a thought, with such a mind, in such a condition, it will grow, ah, yes, it will grow like a man who will shave his chin every day and the hair will grow and grow upon him stronger. You see you cannot control the suggestion lurking in your own mind at such a crisis; you have surrendered yourself to your Will and it plays the implacable conqueror. There are times when one is full of evil like some intoxicated devil.'

Mrs. Harbourmaster gazed at him uneasily during the remainder of his stay, and when the professor rose to go her amiability had grown a little rigid. Alfred gave the professor his bowler hat and held out his baggy umbrella.

'It vos a hat shoost like dis I saw in my dream,' observed the old man, 'you know? ven the vorld split in a half? I opened der lining like so and . . . Ach! Vot is here!'

There in the lining of his hat lay a piece of folded

paper. He held it close up to his spectacles. 'Yes, I tought so,' he chuckled. The history-tutor took it, his wife peering over his shoulder. The writing on the slip of paper was beautiful and clear as though engraved on copper –

My trumpets shall blow from a cloud.

As they gazed in silent mystification Gingl burst into laughter. 'Ach, dat is me again, no doubt. It is not genuine, no, no. I suppose I copy dis message and put it here. It is my subconscious. I vork underground, like a mole. Vot did I tell you! I am half a loonateek, bevare of me!' And he shook hands with them both on the dim landing outside their flat. 'Good nide.'

'Wait,' said the lady, 'while I bring a light for you to go down by.'

'No, please, do not trouble,' said he, preparing to descend the stairs.

'I *must* hold a light for you to go down by – I should not like you to break your neck on *our* stairs!'

'Ach, neither should I. I've quide an affection for my neck.'

'How do you display your affection?' she called mischievously after him.

He peered up at her from the stairs. 'Vell, I put a clean collar round it somedimes, ha, ha, ha! Good nide! Good nide!'

For the rest of the evening Harbourmaster was in

a subdued and meditative mood. Whimsical and outrageous as the ideas of his old friend were apt to be, they often impressed him by the devilish power of conviction that Gingl had. The most fantastic conceptions became not merely tenable, but reasonable. You might shout with laughter at them, but when he had gone your mind refused to discard the speculations he had aroused. Mad, preposterous, incredible – but were they really impossible? Truth! What is true? Truths have their day, until they are found out; convictions die, no truth lives for ever. Credence is a rolling ball of snow; possibly his friend had already accomplished some part of his awful claim – Harbourmaster began to recall strange circumstances attending one or two recent deaths in the university.

'Faugh! How foolish I am!' he exclaimed inwardly, but at bedtime he sat for a long while before he crossed the landing to the bedroom. Lucy's uneasiness had left her, she was half asleep. He undressed, and put out the candle. The light from a street lamp just below their window came through the chink between blind and sash, and lay in a ribbon across the bed.

'I wonder,' he said to Lucy, as he lay beside her, 'how far he ever goes with his experiments.'

She was sleepy and very unresponsive to his musing, so he lay still until he remembered that he had not kissed his wife. He turned to her and saluted her softly on the chin, then he gathered himself for

repose and slumbered. But his slumbers were full of vision, and the visions full of horror; he kept walking along Ealing Broadway and the world kept splitting behind him, falling away from his heels, no matter how madly he strove to advance. Looming ahead he saw a vast brown cloud rolling down upon him; it seemed to be hiding a monstrous gleam of light. From the heart of it came a vast blare of trumpets. As it advanced to destroy him he was assailed by horrors, clinging things with which he fought madly. He tossed them from him with incredible triumphs. Suddenly he was back in his own town, in his own street, in his own room, his own bed, but still he was besieged by that brown passionate cloud and the roaring trumpets that came rattling his house with thunder. Leaping from the bed, he heard the clock of St. Saviour's boom three significant strokes. A chink of light from the window gave him one brief tormenting glimpse of his wife. In his struggles her gown had been torn from her; she sat upon the edge of the bed, her nostrils bleeding; her hands held to her face were dabbled with blood, a stream of it falling upon one of her breasts, slipping, slipping from the nipple to splash upon her white thigh. He gathered that figure of her in one flash of his eyes, but he could realize no more, for the vast terror of the house heaved all about him. Outside the door the Thing that menaced him urged its overwhelming approach; huge and malign he knew, he knew. Trembling like a dying dog he

stood opposite the door, the wild whirling storm that traversed the house upgathered for a final annihilating plunge; he heard the sobs of his wife in the premonitory silence. Then the door crashed open; with a great cry he charged out upon the darkness of the stairs into a vast gleaming strangling cloud that engulfed him. Mrs. Harbourmaster in a delirium of anxiety leapt at him there upon the landing and dragged him back to bed. Dazed, trembling and whimpering he was seemingly unhurt. She lit a candle and although they spoke not a word to each other her ministrations tranquillized him at last and he fell into slumber. But there was no slumber for her. The wretched woman crept to the mirror to gaze with fascinated horror at her own blood-splashes. These she sponged away, and then, still too anxious and faint to rest, for her mind had already flung its coil of suspicion around the professor and her wit was working to defeat his damnable project, she dressed herself and sat down by the bedside to watch and wait, the night lapsing tardily, until, peering through the blind, she saw the welcome day beginning to shine upon the opposite roofs. There was a black dog standing in the road below her, as still and solid as only a dreaming animal can stand, and a thought of the black dogs of legend and mystery filled her mind with new symbols of terror. But as she drew up the blind the dog glanced casually up at her, shook himself into friskiness, and trotted away. The sound and movement

of the town grew and were friendly; they cheered her, and then she became drowsy and yawned. At last she laid herself tenderly by the side of her mate and slept.

At breakfast they did not discuss the events of the night, they tacitly recognized the safety of silence. The dread impalpability of the peril hung in the air about them, but they knew, both of them knew, they knew the source, they guessed the cause. Lucy's unlucky remark to the horrible professor had provoked the intoxicated devil of which he had spoken, but each was afraid to acknowledge the dire suspicion that lay so black in both their minds. (He had tried to kill Alfred!) They would not speak more of it yet, they dared not, for if that were the key a word now might bring them again within the operation of that mysterious stealthy power, cruel as the crash of lightning to a delicate eye. (He tried to kill me, he nearly succeeded!) And so they pretended to each other that the night had been humid, with thunder in the air, and full of bad dreams.

Harbourmaster was too much shattered to go about his business, and as the morning wore away the strain of suspense became unendurable to Lucy, her angry grief grew desperate.

'I am going out for a little while,' said she, appearing suddenly in the doorway, dressed for walking.

Her husband stared at her, but she went without another word. He guessed her errand, and won-

dered in what way her clever cute mind would deal with the professor. He himself sat as hopeless helpless and confused as a frog bewitched by a snake; he could not bend his mind to contemplate this ghastly impingement; will gone, wits ravaged, he had no defences to propound, nothing; he was at the mercy of – of what? The mercy of a friend who had become an 'intoxicated devil' and was trying to kill him. Trumpets and clouds! Dreams! Perhaps it was only a nightmare? He had had a nightmare, nothing more than that, it was obviously a nightmare, it could *be* nothing more. Gingl's notion of destroying a body by merely thinking so was a joke (he was always joking), perfectly and positively insane of course. The professor was a maniac who ought really to be taken care of by some authority. Everything he excogitated was against something or other, against science, against history, against knowledge, against experience, in fact it was against everything, against common sense and against Truth. And that was complete negation. Truth was everlasting, of course it was, the professor was a maniac. All the same he would be helpless if it were true! Though he flew to the ends of the earth, or swallowed elixirs of invisibility, that malignant power would be bound to reach him; nothing could interpose between him and its devastating wave in space, nothing, he was doomed, doomed! And there was no hope on earth – unless his wife could save him?

After half an hour's absence he heard her ascending the stair, and felt that her return was too soon, all too soon for her to have accomplished anything. She entered the room with a sad air of tragedy and, running to her husband who stood up eagerly before her, she took him into her arms with a great comforting hug and burst into tears.

'My dear,' she cried hysterically, 'it's all right, it's all right, he's dead!'

'What, what do you say?' asked her husband.

'He's dead, dead,' she sobbed. 'And I'm so glad.'

At that news his burden slipped callously from him, not even the intrigue of decency could screen his manifest relief. Gingl had died in the night, as far as Lucy could discover, at the very hour of her husband's frenzy. There had been some mysterious indications which she could not define, and which she could not at this time with any propriety pursue. There would probably be an inquest.

The verdict of the inquest recorded that Solomon Gingl died of heart failure, but the Harbourmasters knew different – although they differed from each other about the difference! Neither doubted that the professor had really discovered some such terrible gift as he had claimed; neither doubted that he had tried to exercise it – had they not had the proof? Lucy indeed believed that the very effort had brought him to his death; he had – putting it crudely – burst himself in trying to kill Alfred. Just that, neither more nor less, was the theory of

Lucy Harbourmaster; but her husband was of a more sentimental, a more imaginative, cast of mind. He held that the bond of friendship between himself and the professor was of a singular and pure quality, and in his opinion it was this that had caused Gingl to will his *own* death and thus save Alfred from the 'intoxicated devil' he could not control; rather than kill Alfred he had killed himself. In other words Gingl's death was a mystical suicide. If that were true it was divinely heroic. And it *might* be true. He knew the quality of his strange old friend, for years he had known and valued him, admired him for his singular gifts, his lofty ideals, his devotion to things of the mind; he had only the warmest memories of his kindness and charm.

In this way Harbourmaster came to regard the death of the professor as an act of martyrdom, a view he maintains to the present day. Isn't it queer – the things some people can bring themselves to believe!

HOMER DODD WAS A CLERK IN A BREWERY AND when young had been full of ambition. But what is the use of ambition in a brewery, a country brewery at that? Haggar and Chibnall's Entire was a household word within a radius of ten miles of Humpingden, but within fifteen miles it was only casually appraised. In twenty miles it was rarely met and seldom mentioned. In thirty miles it succumbed to its parochial doom and was unknown. If time or distance or whatnot could do that to an old malty aromatic conservative brewery, what could it not do to the ideals of a Homer Dodd who had none of those peerless qualities! There was no Haggar now, not a Chibnall even, there was only a Company Limited; there had been a fair number of Haggars and quite a few Chibnalls in days gone by, but all that was left of them was their beautiful old brewery beside its stream that ran past the village that depended largely on the Company Limited, who depended in their counting-house to some trifling extent upon the honesty and exactness of Homer Dodd, son of William Dodd the under-gardener to Squire Brownsill of Humpingden Hall, Humpingden.

The laggard heavy stream drooled by the brewery wharf, with its barrels, barges, and chimney stack, and the office where Homer sat, and Homer had only to lift an eye from his book of accounts to

enjoy a vision. On the opposite bank of the river a hill of ground, curved like a young moon and green as Eden, rose up to a vast collar of trees, and amid this stood an abbey of nuns with its belfry and its holy air. Sometimes nuns in couples with dark robes and absurd white headgear would be seen strolling about the greensward there, but Homer did not care for nuns, and he had a conviction that they were lazy.

'But they have very sweet knowledge, they nuns,' his mother argued.

'They have,' commented Homer, ' and they have not.'

'The kind of knowledge that would get you to heaven,' pursued she, 'easy.'

'It would,' Homer replied, 'and it wouldn't.'

'It must do one or the other.' Mrs. Dodd had the sure and certain hope of that, but Homer retorted:

'Not necessarily.'

That was Homer all over. He knew that a crushing emphasis of ignorance was often as effective as a crushing weight of knowledge, and he was aware that he had plenty of the one and little of the other. The pursuit of knowledge was difficult for one born and reared in Humpingden, small dull Humpingden.

When Homer left school old Squire Brownsill had offered to take him on as a gardener, under his father William, but at the first hint of this from his mother the boy had taken himself off to the brewery and got a job in the office. You earned more money in an office than you earned in a garden.

'But I say it's like this . . .' His father discussed the insurrection with some heat.

'Ho, it is a very good thing for him,' interrupted Mrs. Dodd, who had secretly urged her son to this course.

'But what does it all come to, this setting on a stool? A man wants a craft,' said the father.

'Well, he is a good scholar at the pen and he's a good hand at the drawing. He done a picture of Marshall Croxford's donkey something beautiful. Like life it was.'

'Life! Thass a donkey as near death as ever was. It's starved, you can count the hairs on its tail.'

'Ah,' sighed Mrs. Dodd, 'it do want a bit of a rest.'

'Rest! I tell you that donkey wants a relieving officer.'

'Well, he's a good scholar,' declared Homer's mother, 'and it is a good start in life.'

'A rum start, adding up other people's money.'

'And why not?' snapped she; 'that's no worse than growing other people's cauliflower. My brother Bob was a sailor, and proud of it I am. He travelled the world round and saw every one of the King's colonies, but he never did and never could sail his own ship, could he?'

'Thass different,' protested her husband.

'Nothing of the kind. Be honest, William. You never knowed a soldier as ever fought his own battles, neither, now did you?'

'Thass different.'

'And besides,' concluded Mrs. Dodd, 'a clurk is more genteel.'

That gentility was one of Homer's secret ambitions, though he was never to succeed in shuffling off his country husk and was to talk with the rich utterance of a ploughman all his days.

'Why don't you want to come a-gardening with me, my son?' asked William Dodd. ''Tain't hard work over yon; the soil's as soft as silk and grows taters as big as my shoe.'

It appeared that the boy had a grievance against the Squire, who had recently sent him on a long journey, several miles in the rain with a message, and had rewarded him with . . . what do you think?

'What did he give you?' asked father William.

'A threepenny bit,' answered the boy.

'Humph!' Even the parent was shocked.

'He won't live long,' said young Homer scornfully.

The utterance was strangely prophetic. Within a year or two the Squire who for half a century had honourably pursued that most agreeable of callings, the three Rs of squirearchy – reeving, riding and rent-collecting – was to the grief of his friends bitten by a pig and died of lockjaw. He was succeeded by his son, recently married to an actress whose face was too pink, too freshlooking to be fresh. What with the actress and the newfangled fads of the young Squire, Humpingden was livened up, the Hall itself renewed its stucco, and even that pleasant spot

in front of it where three roads met was transformed and genteelized. It was a triangle of rough green turf where a white signpost grew like a lily and directed you to Pollock's Cross or Peck Common, and loungers sat there on Sunday mornings to gaze at the Vale of Humpingden, and smoked and swore with fluent affability. Very pleasant it was. Now the triangle was rolled and mown with such an austerity of virginal tidiness that not a soul had the hardihood to step upon it, and none halted near it lest they should be accused of some violating desire.

With reasonable despatch the actress gave birth first to a daughter named Laura, and then to a scandal which resulted in her divorcement from the Squire.

'Did she love him?' was everybody's wonder, when the actress was so tearful and penitent.

'Haw!' chuckled Homer Dodd. 'Loved him as a lark loves trees.' For Homer was grown up now, and achieving wisdom if not knowledge. Learning was beyond him, there was only his craving for some measure of gentility.

'The parish of Humpingden,' he said to his mother, 'is full of men who've stuffed their noddles with things they've no mind for and knowledge they don't know how to use. They do not. And the churchyard's full of 'em too.'

'And what's the harm of it?' retorted Mrs. Dodd.

'No harm at all that I can see.'

'God prosper 'em,' she continued.

'But what's the use of it?' he asked. 'It's like picking up stones in one corner of a field and marching 'em over to another corner. You begin picking up stones as soon as you're born and be the time you come to your gave there's a tidy bagful to tip into it. Lumber. If you lumber up your brains the cockles of your heart won't grow big enough to get warm. That's my fancy however.'

Homer's figure was tallish and slack, but neatly clad, though his feeling for dress was sombre – as befits a clerk. His hair was as light as honey, winter and summer his face was tanned, and though he walked always with his head slightly bowed it was not dolefully done; he was a lively freehanded man, and liveliness was always as welcome in Humpingden as a plate of cherries. The uncouth ambitions of his boyhood had been sloughed. These had mostly centred around a uniform of some sort – soldier, sailor, constable, porter or page – for early in life he had perceived that a uniform conferred distinction upon the wearer, and if Homer yearned for one thing more than any other – love, money, or sublimity – it was uniqueness. And the uniqueness of Humpingden was that this was impossible there. The only uniform that he regarded now was that of the Squire as sheriff of the county. This was beyond his own hope and reach, a mere ideal, but there was still one form of adornment that clad a private man with his own private nobility, no less,

and Homer was sworn to the consummation of that dream, though it would have to be done sixpence by sixpence as a slave might hoard for ultimate freedom. This noble attire was an evening dress suit. No common form, no trite or cheapened gear would satisfy his soul; this was no suit of clothes, it was raiment. Nothing was forgotten, the list was drawn and calculated close.

One coat with tails
a pair of trousers with
stripes
? braces
one white waistcoat
a hat that let's down
black waistcoat
pair of shiny shoes (laces)
and pumps
socks (plain and black)
a pair of white kid gloves
white shirt (stiff)
collar with wings
white tie
black ditto
a muffler
one opera cloak
a handkerchief (silk)
studs? gold or pearl
links? ditto

Often he would take this list from his desk in the office and brood upon it with so tranced a speculation that when he raised his eyes and looked out across the river the vacancy of his dream was more vivid than the solid texture of stream and field, and he could see neither the abbey nor quiet nuns walking there. The yellow flowers in the grass reminded him then of things like studs, and even the glow of loosestrife bending over the heavy-eyed water was but a shade to line that fabulous cloak. This immortal notion had been conceived when he was twenty. Its realization would cost him a year's salary at the least – but what of that? Year by year the old brewery advanced his salary, sometimes by as much as a shilling a week, and the old brewery bore this strain with the common fortitude of breweries both ancient and modern. Steadfastly Homer set aside a tithe of his pocket money (Account No. 2), and at rare intervals he was able to add a guinea when the brewery let him repaint an inn sign, The White Swan, the Black Horse, or The Old Market Tavern. Homer had that gift, and in the corner of each sign you would see his name inscribed in clear black letters, H. DODD. ARTIST. The designation may have been only a claim – it might have been a challenge – but it is to be feared that the pale object with orange feet shimmering in a veil of blue liquid was an uncouth creature for a swan.

His parents knew nothing of this fantastical desire, but he had told his only sister Fan. Homer

was fond of her. She was a big girl, with plump country contours, and walked majestically. Though vague as to expression her face was agreeable in shape, and nothing marred the pure perfection of her skin but the one trifling fleck where she had been bitten on the cheek by a peacock in Kidderminster. Fan was a year or two younger than Homer; he had no brothers, and he had sworn her to secrecy. Sometimes his mother would pester him skittishly: when was he going to marry and settle down?

'Plenty 'a time for that sort 'a thing.' And this reply of Homer's would provoke her.

'Pooh!' she would scoff, 'your unborn children will never have a father.'

And he would answer mildly: 'They may – and they may not. But he'll have a smart suit to his back, eh Fan, one day!'

And Fan would smile and look very knowing.

Perhaps it was a mistake for him to have told Fan of his nest-egg, for there came a time when she made a slip with a fellow she had been engaged to for some years and wanted to get married in a hurry. Her man was quite unprepared; he was a wild young gamekeeper named Spatkin who wasted his substance on riotous racehorses, and for a while it looked as if the worst was to happen to poor Fan. But when Homer heard of her quandary he behaved as all fond brothers should and bought her a suite of furniture. That alone cost him fourteen pounds

twelve shillings, and what with the price of linoleum and other odds and ends his fund (Account No. 2) was terribly depleted. Homer was unconcerned about that; he did not seem to be disappointed in any way, and Fan married her fellow and went to live in a village some way off.

'Well,' Homer consoled himself, 'if I had that suit now I'd not have much chance of wearing it, not here in Humpingden. It would be wasted. I can wait!'

In the course of time Fan was blessed with a daughter, Betty Spatkin, and soon afterwards she persuaded her husband to give up gamekeeping and embark on the business of greengrocery. So they moved into a town, where he opened a modest shop, and borrowed money for this enterprise. Homer was induced to guarantee some portion of the debt, and he signed a document for this purpose full of a lot of long words that he could not understand; indeed he could not pronounce some of them, but that only made it seem all the more impressive and legal.

When all this happened he was twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. After a while he began again to consult the list in his desk, and to scrutinize, a little despondently, Account No. 2. Across the river the same picture met his gaze; sometimes he would have a playful vision of himself walking under the abbey wall in the marvellous cloak and the hat that let down; at a certain point he would cast open

the cloak and, to nobody in particular, reveal his splendid attire.

So he dreamed on for two or three years until he was thirty, and then a bad thing happened – his father died. Like all generous men William Dodd had been improvident and was only lightly insured. To bury him and provide black clothing for himself and his mother cost Homer a pretty penny. He loved his father; he was sorry he had died, but the obsequies took a large sum, an astonishing sum. Then, of course, as head of the family and its only means of support he had to increase the weekly allowance to his mother, and so his fund for that far-off finery languished and declined. That fund was a special and private one, Account No. 2; it had no connection with his general savings, Account No. 1, which held his reserves against the immediate contingencies of life.

But as time went on things settled down again and were easy again. His salary at the brewery now amounted to thirty-two shillings a week. Good pay, you know, secure and regular, a nice easy life, rather quiet now and then, but pleasant surroundings. There was the ever-rolling stream forever lapping at the wharf; fair flowers in summer, the fleabane and willow herb frilling the waterside, the smell of malt, the fleet and careless birds. Nothing could impugn the integrity of time, so richly crusted was the old abbey wall, not even those mysterious nuns walking in holiness across the living green of the

fields in their dead dark gowns and white fluttering hats. Silly hats, silly women, it was impossible that angels could be anything like them, but somehow they gave a sweet tone to the day and its quiet affairs. You could not judge of sanctity by its clothes; their uniform was but a few secular rags to wrap the spirit in.

Minor troubles, it seemed, grew on Homer Dodd as easily as beans on a vine; they had their punctual season; yet they rested but lightly on him for he was no complainer, he was a hearty man with an appetite. Food was his delight, he ate it well and paid attention to it. He never looked under the table, there was never anything there but darkness and feet. His mother knew now of his late-concealed ambition, but she began to think he never would buy the suit he had so long desired and for which he had served so long. When she suspected that he had at last amassed sufficient money, and still he did not procure the suit, she began to bother and urge him. Gracious lord, but he was thirty-five years of age!

'True enough, I tell you,' Homer replied. 'But if I had 'em now I couldn't wear 'em. Where could I wear 'em?'

'Pooh! you can't wear it if you haven't got it, don't you see?' Mrs. Dodd was a very amiable woman, but like all women, amiable or otherwise, she was a compendium of illogicality; yet when it served her purpose she could insist upon logic,

and nothing but logic, with the bruising insistence that made one desire sweetly to assassinate her. 'So it's stupid saying you don't get it because you can't wear it, Homer.'

'I'll get it, I'll get it, I tell you! My mind's set on that.'

'Well then, why don't you? Homer, my boy, why not buy just a good little second-hand suit? It would be much cheaper, and serve you just as well.'

'Pah!' snorted the horrified man.

'And at least you would have it, even if you didn't wear it.'

'I tell you I will wear it! Of course I will.'

'Well,' sighed his mother, 'I'd like to see you in it.'

'You may do that, sooner than you think for. Go slow as you can is what I think, always, but do it with a rush when the time belongs to you.'

And at last Homer did it with a rush. A week of his annual holiday, spent in London, provided the opportunity, and from top to toe all the glory of his choice was regarded and approved. The suit came to Humpingden, and when it came it was laid with care, like a robe of sanctity, in a roomy chest and there it remained, locked up. Account No. 2 was closed, the list was destroyed, and yet . . .? Homer came to wonder vaguely whether a final accomplishment might not create another void as big almost as that it all so handsomely filled. Somehow he was not at the journey's end, although he

had arrived; but there was now no other end for him to travel to.

He kept the suit idle for a year; two years. It lay buried in the roomy chest, invested with tissue paper and packets of perfumed moth-killer. Sometimes he inspected it to see that all was well, and after the bath in his bedroom on Sunday mornings he would occasionally try on some part of it – the squash hat was so very alluring. Nothing more than that. So again his ageing mother began to bother and urge him.

'It's a sin and a shame, my boy. Why don't you wear it? That beautiful suit! You know it is.'

'I know,' he said.

'Well then? You'll never have another one. It's a sin and a shame.'

'There's nought to wear it to.'

'There are dances, Homer, dozens.'

'You know I can't dance, mother.'

'Of course you can, you stupid thing! Go and learn.'

'That's all very fine,' said Homer Dodd.

'Or join the Freemasons. I can't think why you don't go to church in it sometimes.'

'You know I never go to church.'

'But you ought to go to church, Homer.'

'Indeed to glory! What sort of a scarecrow d'you want to make of me? Go yourself!'

'I do go.'

'Tcha! Why do you go?'

'Well, I go to encourage the vicar. He don't get much congregation, but he's such a nice man.'

'You know, mother, you're not a religious woman at all.'

'Homer! I am.'

'You're not.'

'I am!'

'And you never have been, so there.'

'O yes, my boy, I have. I was brought up to it, thank God. And it's the way you're brought up. Our mother always made me go to church. I used to quarrel with her about it, dreadful I used to quarrel with our mother, but it was quite right, you know, for if you weren't brought up to it and made to go to church, why, you never would go, would you? You must have your photograph taken in it, Homer; and I'll tell you another thing: if you an't going to wear it yourself why don't you hire it out to those as would be glad of it for dances and weddings? You could make a tidy bit of money that way. . . .'

'Mother, you don't understand.'

'It's a sin and a shame!'

'You don't understand anything at all, not a damn scrap. But I'll tell you one thing about that suit.' His manner was impressive. 'I want you to give me your solemn promise about it.'

'What?' asked Mrs. Dodd.

Homer gave a preliminary cough, and then plunged: 'When I die, you're to see that I'm buried in that dress suit, all of it.'

The old woman glared speechless at him.

'That's all, mother, just buried in it. Promise me that.'

'That I shall not.' Mrs. Dodd indignantly bristled. 'The idea!'

'Why not? I want your solemn promise.'

'For one thing,' said she, 'you'll outlive me, please God, many and many a year. And besides that, you can't be buried in a suit of clothes, Homer.'

'Why not?'

'Not with trousers on and all! Certainly not! Homer Dodd, what are you thinking of!'

Now her son displayed some thoughtful cunning. 'Mother, I shall make a will; I shall make a will straight away and leave instructions for to be buried in my dress suit. And that you'll have to do, whether or no.'

Mrs. Dodd remained a block of contemptuous adamant. 'You may say what you like, my boy, but I shall have nothing to do with it, that I shall not, nothing at all.'

'You can't,' said Homer hotly, 'go against a man's last will and testament, signed and sealed. A dead man's instructions must and shall be carried out. It's law.'

'We shall see about that,' was Mrs. Dodd's rejoinder. 'You an't dead yet.'

Dodd was not the first to whom possession was something more than a challenge to envy or a prop

to peculiar pride. Save for one pollution his robe of sanctity was to remain what it had become – the pure heaven of his desire. He had simply no wish to wear it. The ardours of the quest had perhaps exhausted him, as if a man with a fondness for Hesperidean apples had ground out his teeth in the search. Well, many's the man has bought a thing and a few things that are of no service to him, and locked them in a cabinet for to be stared at. It is so indeed. The things people will put into a cabinet! Why, one of them once hung a copper warming pan in the hall of his house. For ornament! Astounding! There was never a red cinder ever seen in it. And between the doormat and the barometer was also a brass soup-ladle, big enough to convey half a pint – but empty! Impossible to tell whether it was there to mortify the postman or to signify a descent from Bumble, but it is certain that neither spoon nor pan ever suffered in service. The honour of disuse was theirs and they were accorded reverence. Two ideas, however, requited Homer Dodd: first, although he might be content forever with the mere possibility, he *could* wear his suit whenever he had a mind to: second, its possession marked him off quietly and impeccably from the halfbaked insufficiently fledged clerks who shared his office, and from those crabbed countrymen his neighbours. What an uncouth world they occupy! On Sundays the countryman changes his shirt. If he be a young man he changes all his clothes and gets into a pair of extraordinarily

polished sacred shoes that are worn only on the Sabbath. But a middle-aged man is with difficulty persuaded to indulge in such diversity. At noon he may drag a crumpled suit from a damp box and put it on, but not all the arts of Helen could move him to wear a collar, and he goes off to the inn in an old hat and a pair of mouldy boots; walking slowly, not because of his deliberating nature but because his limbs have for so long been anchored to the soil.

> Pride and ambition here
> Only in far-fetched metaphors appear.

It is enough if the day provide him with meat and drink; there are few things he loves. He may wish for a little more money, a little more leisure, a little more joy, but these deficiencies are not tragic to him. As often as the sun of heaven shines he whistles at his work and touches his hat to his master without envy, for truly no one has a claim that is likely to disturb his natural rights – so low is their level.

Homer's father had been much like that, but not for Homer was such rude inadequate scale, and the unworn suit was as significant to him as the inner revelation may be to every divergent mystic. It made him *feel* himself a gentleman, made him even cast an audacious eye on Laura Brownsill, the daughter of the Squire.

When that lovely girl celebrated her twenty-first birthday the Squire invited all the village folk to a tea on his lawns, and Laura had certainly singled Homer

out for some attention. This was on a warm Sunday in mid-April, when the formal garden was gay with yellow sprays on its deciduous shrubs, with pink blossoms on saplings that hadn't any leaves – and papas were explaining that those trees were foreigners, from Japan. All the idle families in the world seemed to be congregated there, strolling about the grassy pathways, clothed with propriety and behaving with sedateness, apeing an enjoyment they were desirous of really feeling. Yet although the verdure of the lawns invited them to loll, to bask, to meditate, to play, they were too inhibited to accept. They stared at the fountain with eight jets, at the labels in the lake announcing the names of lilies that were to flourish there later on, and looked timid and admonished their children. Homer surprisingly found himself in the yew pleasaunce, alone with Laura. He apologized to her for his mother's absence. (Really he had not wanted her to accompany him, she looked so 'dowdy.') And Laura was explaining to him the pleasant features of the grounds.

'Yes, I know,' he said, 'my father worked here once upon a time.'

'I can just remember him,' Laura smiled.

'And I nearly took a job here meself once.'

'Indeed,' said Laura. Bright brown hair she had, a round pink face, a charming bust, and her white clothing gave her a fragrant blossomy appearance.

'But I never cared for manual work,' he went on.

'If you've got a headpiece you want something more mental.'

'Of course.' Her recognitions were perfect. 'And now?'

'I'm at the brewery.'

'Ah, yes,' said Laura.

'In the office,' he explained.

'Ah, yes,' Laura repeated, 'that gives you more scope.'

'Well, it does and it doesn't,' said he.

'Yes,' she sighed, 'that is so.' And for some time they were silent. At last he ventured:

'We are going to have a beautiful summer.'

'You think so?'

'Yes. The kind of summer you'd wish for if you knew it was to be your last.'

'It is a splendid day. I shall always remember it.'

'So shall I,' he returned, meaningly. Laura smiled at him with such frankness that the whole richness of her being and influence was demoralizing. They were quite alone, unseen.

'I am now my own mistress,' the adorable creature chattered.

'I wish you were mine,' said he. She did not seem to notice the remark; it glided over and past her, and Homer idiotically hoped she would give him the opening again so that he might repeat it.

'Yes, it's a day to remember' – stupid how husky your voice got sometimes – 'and I'll remember it too.'

That was useless. Ah, but she was a grand creature!

'Now, let me get you some tea,' she said, and they went back to the lawn. 'Johnson!' Laura called out to her butler. Johnson was dressed in a suit something like Homer's evening dress suit, but not quite. The boots were all wrong, and the trousers. Waiters always fell away at footgear, but in his sacred chest there was a pair of shiny shoes the Squire himself might wear, but not old Bill Johnson, who pretended he did not know him and called him 'Sir.'

When later on Laura said 'Good afternoon' and shook hands with Homer she gave him a smile that seemed to invite, to anticipate something further. But what could he anticipate, or she invite?

Ah, the endless futilities of desire! Yet he did not really desire Laura Brownsill, at least not so much as he desired her peculiar recognition. And she had devoted a special graciousness to him. He thought of her a great deal one way and another, and on the rare occasions when they met in the village she would stop and chat to him for a few moments. How was his mother? And his work? And was life pleasant? Mother was quite well, he told her. And work was simple, nothing to put a strain on a man's headpiece, you know. And life was pleasant enough if you were satisfied with your lot . . . but . . . of course. 'Ah yes,' Laura would say; 'is it not a fine day?' and 'Good morning' or 'Good evening,' as the case might be.

So two or three years went by, and then, one day,

she had called at his home and asked for him. The Dodds lived in a corner cottage that had a fine chestnut tree in the front garden and a row of irises under the window. He was not home yet, Mrs. Dodd told her.

'O,' temporized the beautiful woman. 'We are having a dance at the hall next week and I wondered . . . I am told he has some dress clothes?'

'Yes, he has,' replied Mrs. Dodd, 'this long time.'

'I thought . . . perhaps . . . but I'd better call and ask him myself. To-morrow. What time?'

Dodd's mother told her what time Homer would be at home.

When Homer heard the tremendous news he was smitten with exquisite qualms. Why in the name of fortune had he never learned to dance? Why this? Why that? How was she looking? And even as he debated the matter with his mother a knock came at the door. He leaped to answer it, and there was Laura again.

'O, I thought I would catch you this evening,' she explained.

'Come in,' cried Homer Dodd, throwing wide the door.

The lovely creature hesitated: 'I hope I am not disturbing you?'

'Come in, come in,' he repeated. 'Present company is always accepted.'

She went into the little parlour and plunged

straightway into the matter of her visit. They were giving a ball in the following week, she wondered if he would be disengaged that night.

'Well, yes, but . . .' said Homer Dodd timorously.

'We are expecting a lot of people. Would you be able to come along and help Johnson?'

'Help? How? What Johnson?'

'The butler,' she smiled explicatively, and then gazed away from him with a trifle of shyness. 'We have to get extra help and we'd rather have someone we know and can trust. You have a dress suit?'

'Ah! You mean for me to come and wait on the visitors?'

'Yes. You would be paid, of course.'

'Help the butler?'

'Yes. We want someone we know and can trust.'

For a moment he thought he would go away and thoroughly die. 'But I know nothing about such work,' he protested. 'I've never done such a thing in my life. I couldn't do that, I wouldn't do it.'

Laura looked disappointed, perplexed even.

'I thought you said, once – it was at my birthday party – that you would like to work at the Hall.'

In a flash Homer realized that she had not comprehended his daring then. 'I wish you were mine' – he had said – and she had thought he had wanted to come and look after her fowls, he supposed. And the clatter his mother was making with those dishes

in the kitchen almost demented him. He uttered a mirthless laugh.

'O no, no, I never meant anything like that. No, I meant . . . O, very different.'

It began to gleam upon her that something was wrong, vitally wrong, but for the life of her she could not fathom the blunder.

'I am sorry, Mr. Dodd,' she said. 'I see. Please excuse me.' And she held out her hand, adorably tender. Homer held her hand, smiling again. He was a whimsical fellow. The devastating proposal had swept him in its cold clasp like an avalanche, but having escaped this death he got up and began to pelt the avalanche with snowballs. He said:

'What time would you like me to come?'

Laura, still more mystified, answered:

'Would you really care to?'

'Yes,' he said.

'You are sure? You can spare the time?'

'Yes,' he said.

So she gave him all particulars and instructions.

'It will be rather a long night for you.'

'The longer the better,' retorted Homer.

'And . . . er' – it was delicately uttered – 'how much am I to pay you?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all,' said proud Mr. Dodd.

'Shall we say a sovereign?' she pursued, suavely.

'Very well, thank you,' he submittingly agreed.

'Good night.'

Homer went into the kitchen and told his mother

what it was that Miss Brownsill required of him. Mrs. Dodd was elated when she heard he was to get so much money for such a little service. Homer went upstairs and took the moth-killer out of his dress clothes. Then he went to bed early, and dreamed that he was frying hundreds of eggs in a large ball-room. Each egg had to be fried singly and laid carefully and neatly in lines on the ball-room floor until the initials H D and L B had been formed and then encircled by a heart. It took a long time.

On the evening of the ball Mrs. Dodd prepared her son's dress clothes, put the magnificent shoes beside the fire, set the squash hat acock upon the dresser, and hung the rich cloak across the arm-chair.

'Don't want those shoes,' he exclaimed when he came in, 'shall wear my old 'uns. You can put that white vest away, shall wear the black. What a fool of a woman you are, mother! D'ye think I can wear that hat and the gloves up to Brownsill's kitchen? God bless my soul! Nor that cloak neither.'

Wasn't he a queer fellow! It disturbed the poor woman that he should go, as you might say, only half-dressed. He looked grand in the tailed jacket, and the starched shirt and things. It only wanted that hat, and the cloak hung over his arm, to finish him off properly. But no, he covered himself up in an old top-coat and went off wearing a cap. Wilful, foolish, but a good son. Never a moment's uneasiness, never a pang.

He was still a fairish-looking man, with a tolerable

figure, though he was getting on towards forty. His hair had thinned and there was an austerity in his gait, but still he was a lively man, freehanded, and was liked by Humpingden men.

Mother Dodd sat up dozing, hour after hour, during his absence. Ah, she was sleepy, but she could not sleep. She wrote a letter to her daughter Fan, and another to a friend in a distant town. The fire slackened and was renewed. There were nibbling mice under the floor; she smote the floor with a brush but they took no heed. At midnight there was three parts of a moon shining in the sky, and the wind blew cold. The clock ticked on and on; if you could keep pace with that ticking you would not notice time. Time smoothed all things. The clock ticked on, the chestnut tree in the garden heaved its mournful sigh, the dawn came. And with it came her son.

'Well?' said she.

'You ought to been abed,' he replied.

'I've got a nice cup of cocoa for you, Homer.'

'Don't want it. I'm half tight as it is.' He sat down, looking around the kitchen as if it were a place he scarcely recognized, and drummed on the table with his fingers. 'Champagne,' he said. 'She's going to be married.'

'Who?'

'Laura Brownsill.'

'Laura Brownsill! Is she then?'

'Aw. Some rich old foxhunter. The Squire gave

it out at the ball. That's what this ball was for. Sir John Swells. Lady Laura, huh!'

'That's nice,' commented Mrs. Dodd.

'Why?'

'Well, of course it is.'

'He's old enough to be her father! Silly girl.'

'That don't matter,' said Mrs. Dodd, 'not nowadays. And she must do as her father bids her. I wouldn't mind being an old man's darling.'

'Well, I should,' said her son.

'I suppose he's got a lot of money?'

'I'd hope so! He ain't got much else, 'cept a bald head and a spongy sort of nose to look at. I pity her, I do indeed.'

'Humph!' Mrs. Dodd was non-committal. 'I suppose the Squire wants it so.'

'He wants a lot of other things, I may tell you,' said Homer sardonically. 'I overheard him and Mrs. Sansonny spooning together. They weren't aware of me, they were so hot.'

'Mrs. Sansonny!' exclaimed his mother. 'That fat sarah!'

'Ah. She's wide as a barn door, and he's lean as a sheet, but there they were. Fat as she is, she'd no more on than would clothe a child. And he says to her: "I worship you, you devil!" '

'My God,' murmured Mrs. Dodd, 'what a wicked thing to say!'

'Wicked?'

'Well, he's a Christian, or he ought to be. And what did she say? Where was her husband?'

'Dunno,' Homer yawned and began to unlace his boots. 'I crept away. And it's bed for me now.'

'Drink up this cocoa,' said his mother. 'And what did they all say about your suit?'

'Why, nothing.'

'O, but they must have said something, Homer!'

'Nobody didn't, not to me.'

'Nobody?'

'Nobody and nothing. Why should they?'

'Lord!' Mrs. Dodd muttered. 'I think I should have said something.'

'Well, I say bed. Where's candle?'

She lit a candle. 'Drink your cocoa.'

'Damn the cocoa,' said Homer Dodd.

Upstairs in his small bedroom he flung off the grand suit and let it lie on the floor. It was a low-pitched room with beams in the ceiling that would brain you if you were not wary, and it was hung with pestering white muslin. Muslin for the window, for the chair-back, the mirror, for the valance of the bed, and muslin skirts (as if it were a female) for the washing-stand. He stood swaying in his nightshirt until he trod upon the clothes; then he picked up the coat, and holding it at arm's length, muttered: 'Who'll buy it? Fourpence!'

Nothing answered, from nowhere.

'Fourpence!' he repeated.

On the shoulder of the coat he then observed a

pale thread gleaming, a fine single golden hair, and he remembered. . . . In the Hall kitchen the servants had snatched from time to time their own fandango – drinking, dancing, and bantering – and Homer had been beguiled by Polly the parlourmaid. He had hugged her, and she him, they had grown quite fond and daring. Homer picked the hair from his coat and gazed at it ironically.

'Keep that!' he mumbled, letting the coat slip to the floor again. Carefully laying the hair on the washing-table, he set the box of matches atop of it, so that he should find it in the morning. Then he lurched into bed and slept a sleep free of care and dreams.

On rising late he was still so tired that he forgot all about the golden hair under the matchbox, and in tidying up the room afterwards his mother swept it away. Homer did not remember it for two days. It was gone then, and he could not ask his mother if she had noticed such a thing under a box of matches. A pity! But after all it was not fitting to make a sally with the maid whose mistress had befooled you. That would indeed be the action of a poor-minded man. Having been a servant by romantic proxy for a few hours, now let it drop.

In a few months Laura married and went to dwell in Scotland, and within a year she had a child. Though she paid visits to her old home occasionally, it so happened that Homer never saw her again. And Homer, musing upon his unborn romance, came to

believe that Laura was not happy, that she had once had for him, not love perhaps, not quite that, but a loving feeling, and in time this conception accrued and brightened until it appeared that he and she had been separated only by the stern decree of her father! To charge with such fragrant lustre such faint seeming is a debility of any mind; we frame and bring to life the delusions we desire to cherish, lest in the void of our fancies we decline in pride and the soul faint in the shadow of its being.

One day is much like another day in general, but at times something may befall that is not diurnal: it clinches an epoch, stability is gone. Time has begotten a monster. The monster took the form of a letter to Homer from the money-lenders who had befriended Charley Spatkin, to whom Homer was inescapably bound as a surety for the Spatkin loan, and whom a defaulting Spatkin had altogether displeased. They wanted forty pounds! They wanted it immediately, and they wanted it from Homer. O, the misfortune! Homer had not got so much money, he could not pay it. And if he had got it, he would not pay! He stormed at the contrite Spatkin, he wrote to the placid lenders, the unrelenting lawyers, the adamantine bailiffs; there was no useless thing to be done which he did not do, but he could not escape the consequences of his sponsorship. So, finally, he hauled the dress suit from its chest and directed his mother to pack it carefully.

'I don't ever want to see it again,' he said.

There was no help for it; it was packed and sent to a Jew dealer in London who bought the entire panoply – the jacket, the cloak, the hat, shoes, socks, linen, studs and trousers, for a moiety of its cost. There was no help for it.

'I don't ever want to see it again.'

Mrs. Dodd was cloven to the soul.

'As God sees me, it's wicked!' she cried. 'You might just as well ha' been a gardener, like your father.'

'Yes,' said Homer, 'I might. The suit's no use to me now.'

'And never has been,' she added ruefully; ''twas all a foolish fancy, Homer. You've never even worn it.'

'I wore it once,' he said. That had been his only chance of sporting these fine feathers.

Mrs. Dodd recalled the occasion: 'Why, so you did, and it paid you well that time.'

The money received for the suit, with the rest of his savings, discharged the Spatkins of their dilemma.

'I will repay,' the poor greengrocer wrote, 'trust me for that, Homer.'

Trust was far indeed from Homer, but at least the Spatkins, Fan, Charley and their Elizabeth, were on their feet once more. Yet not for long. One night in their town there was a great fire and Charley Spatkin, always a daredevil, in saving some children, lost his own life.

Mrs. Dodd took train and went to the aid of her daughter. After a few days she returned to Humpingden bringing with her the ten-years-old Elizabeth for a short holiday.

'Poor Charley,' said Mrs. Dodd through her tears, 'he done prodigals of bravery.'

Fan remained in her home to wind up the green-grocery business and look around for some new opportunity to live. Soon she had an offer from a kindly rich couple who desired a servant, and then she came home to sound her mother and brother on her project of leaving Betty in their care. No obstacle to this plan interposed, and so Fan went off to service, leaving Betty at Humpingden.

Homer never took a liking to this child. Blood may be thicker than water, but the blood was unattractive. Betty had a round greyish face and ashen hair tied tightly with a ribbon. She was thin and untidy and terribly plebeian. Though spiteful and stupid, she quickly conceived a morose desire to become a nun, like those she often saw walking from the abbey.

'But you are cruel,' says Homer. 'You have a cruel nature. Why is that?'

Betty stares with silent hatred into her uncle's eyes.

'Sometimes you are cruel to the cat, ain't you?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Now mind,' says he severely, 'you are not to ill-treat that cat any more.'

The child says nothing, intimates nothing.

'You understand me, Betty?'

'Yes.'

'All right then.'

Betty goes away. In a little while she returns to Homer and says, 'I've been banging the cat.'

'You have!'

'I threw it down the stairs.'

'What for?'

The child contemptuously grins at him.

'You're a bad thing, Elizabeth. Tit is good for tat, you know. I fear I shall have to serve you the same.'

They were silently unpleasant to each other. The child grew but she did not improve, and as the months wore on Homer's heart ached for that time to come when Betty could rejoin her mother. That happy event he began to fear was yet far off – as far as his forty pounds – and so at last, in despair, he wrote to his sister Fan, making her a fair proposal. His salary was now really a good one; he had been promoted head clerk, some day he might even be manager, but their mother was getting old and the child was something of an anxiety to her. So would it not be fine now if she, Fan, would come back to Humpingden and live with them once more, to help their old mother and look after Elizabeth, who was a good child in many ways but still needed a parent's guiding hand?

Homer wrote like that, and Fan replied to his

'welcome letter,' saying how pleased she was to hear of his progress, he had worked hard for it, he ought to have been made manager years ago, but she was sorry she could not do what he wanted now, and she implored her brother to keep the child. Indeed, she was thinking of getting married again; her sweetheart would marry her at once if only some arrangement about Betty could be made. No man liked to have the care of another's child, etc., etc. If Homer would only keep her in Humpingden she would know the child was in safe hands; and she, Fan, would contribute to her support. And she pointed out that soon Betsy would be old enough to go out to work, into service; they would employ her at the Hall for certain, and so on. It was a hard thing to ask him to do, but he must remember that she was only a widow and had not had the best of luck in life. He had always been a good brother to her and she would be staunch to him.

'The best of luck in life!' he mused over the letter. 'No, no one has that, for no one deserves it.'

But was he to have nothing in life that he really desired? Or deserved? Nothing – though his hopes were not high nor his deeds remarkable. Age came upon you, it had come upon him: younger men could go uphill now faster than he could come down. And yet, what would he have if he had but the power, what mortal desire for which he could still suffer and endure? He felt there was little enough to make a stir about at the best of times, luck or no luck. If

only he could look forward now, as he had been wont to do, to some fine promise of the future – but no, no, there was nothing which age did not wither. His mother was old, and he could only look forward to the time when he would be left to the care and mercy of the hateful Elizabeth. That seemed to be his doom – not love, but loathing.

'It's bad,' he said, folding up the letter. 'Why, I might just as well have been born a fool.'

THE ALMANAC MAN

ONCE UPON A TIME THE MAN WHO MADE ALMANACS lived in the Hundred of Hoo. Sweetapple was his name, Dr. Joseph Sweetapple, and his job in life was to draw up the annual Almanac, the thing that tells you all about this year, next year, and where Robinson Crusoe was born, and the day Christmas will fall due. Some people pretend that this doesn't matter, that the world goes round and Father Christmas takes his chance just like any other fellow, but that is sheer nonsense, because had Dr. Sweetapple forgotten it you might have had Christmas turning up on a Shrove Tuesday, or some such caper as that.

One time the doctor was mighty vexed because he had not got his Almanac finished. Everything was behindhand, for it was close on Christmas, you know, and as a rule the Almanac was ready by the time partridge shooting begins, but this year there was a hitch, and he was very anxious. At the last moment he got wind of a terrible report, that the world was coming to an end quite soon. All this was the plan of a devilish goblin whose name was Old Moore. When Dr. Sweetapple heard of it his heart nearly burst, for he knew that what this old goblin said was bound to be sudden and certain. If Old Moore said so-and-so might be looked for – well, you had to go on looking and looking until you saw it, and when you saw it, there it was.

So Dr. Sweetapple rushed off to see this villain on Christmas Eve.

'What d'ye want?' asked Old Moore.

'Sir,' said Dr. Sweetapple, 'is it true – about the world's end?'

'Ah,' said Old Moore, nodding, 'I want to get it over and done with.'

'That's terribly inconvenient for me,' Dr. Sweetapple murmured.

'O no,' retorted Old Moore, cheerfully, 'O no, a mere fleabite.'

'But excuse me,' said Sweetapple, 'you . . . you . . . what about Almanacs? Who's to look after them?'

'I've done with Almanacs,' said Old Moore. 'I've done with everything. Life is a dull tale, plainly told. I'm sick of the lot of you.'

'Sick of life!' cried Dr. Sweetapple.

'Um,' said Old Moore.

'Sick of Christmas!'

'Yes,' Old Moore grunted. 'I've been everywhere I wanted to go.'

'What! have you been to so-and-so?' asked Dr. Sweetapple.

'No,' replied Old Moore, 'not there, but I've seen everything I want to see.'

'What!' the doctor interrupted again, 'have you seen so-and-so?'

'No,' Old Moore replied, 'not her, but I've done everything I want to do.'

'What!' cried the hasty doctor, 'have you done so-and-so?'

'No, not that, no, no, no,' said Old Moore quite testily, 'but I've prophesied every blessed thing I can. I've prophesied right, I've prophesied wrong, and I've prophesied middling. Now I'm going to stop. No use hanging about. Finished. Open the Book of Fortune and you won't find a balance anywhere, all paid in and paid up and ruled off and finished. Done. I'm hundreds of years old, and that's the whole issue.'

'But . . . but . . . but,' groaned the trembling doctor. 'What about my business? What about Sweetapple's Almanac? Who's to look after 'em? Who's a-going to remind all those members of Parliament when it's – when it's Empire Day, or when the battle of Aboukir was fought?'

'Nobody,' said Old Moore. 'No more Almanacs, no more Old Moore. That's the whole issue.'

'O,' groaned Dr. Sweetapple, 'have you no soul, no courage, no patriotism? Suppose Adam, the first man of all, had given us up like this, where'd we all be now? eh?'

'I can't think a lot about the first man to-day,' Old Moore answered. 'I've got to give my attention to that *last* man, he's the one that's going to tie my wool.'

'And who might that be?' queried Sweetapple.

Old Moore sighed and said 'Father Christmas, of course. If I miss him I shall miss everything again

and there'll be another forecast ruined. He's not the man he was, though, but the saints alone know where he is now.'

Dr. Sweetapple tremblingly asked, 'And when is it all to end?'

'Midnight,' replied the villain.

'To-night!' shrieked the poor doctor.

'Ah, this very Christmas Eve, unless that fellow Christmas is too quick for me.'

Uttering a wild cry Dr. Sweetapple dashed out into the streets. The market-place was full of merry people who were unaware of the doom that was hovering over all. Above the bright shops he could peer into a sky that was a pit of icy blackness, but all around him was music and laughter and warmth. A little acrobat in scarlet tights was performing on a strip of blue carpet in the road. Sweetapple threw him a penny. At a doorstep in a dim corner Sweetapple saw a nun stooping to tie up her shoelace. Her face was pink, but her nose was blue, and he wondered whether she could be one of the saints.

'Pardon me,' said Dr. Sweetapple to her, ' but, ah, but the end of the world is at hand.'

'O,' said the nun, not looking up at him. 'It is only my shoelace broken.'

'Can you tell me,' continued Sweetapple, 'where Christmas is?'

The nun straightened herself with a sweet smile and said: 'Christmas is coming.'

'No, no; O no,' cried the doctor, but the nun

could not stop to listen to him any longer. In the gutter was a man with a tin cart and a fire in it. Sweetapple went up to him and bought a baked potato. He stared at it burning in his hand. 'That doesn't look much like the world's end,' he sighed. Then he waved one hand indignantly towards the merry market square, so musical, so gay, and shouted, 'That doesn't look much like the world's end!'

'O no, sir,' said the baked-potato man. 'That's further up the road, a smartish bit.'

'What do you say?' exclaimed the doctor.

'Away on, sir,' whispered the man. 'I know where you want to go.' And he gave him a good plain direction to somewhere or other, and Sweetapple thought he might just as well go there as do any other mortal thing. Off he went, and soon left the town behind him and plunged into the darkness. There were stars, but they were of no avail to light the way. The first two miles were sharp cold and the next two were so cruel dark that when he came to the halfway town he could not tell if he were walking to his own destruction or not. He stretched out his hands on either side of him thinking he'd touch a house with them, but he could not, and there was not the least chink of a light anywhere nor a living sound. So he went on out of it, along black roads until he came to a watchman's fire and a red lantern. He called out to the watchman: 'Where goes this road?' And the man answered: 'To the world's end. Straight on.'

On went the Almanac Man until he came to a heath, where it was as dark as before, and colder. The stars shone above, but the blackness grew deeper, and when he put his foot to the path that went across the heath he trod in water.

'O dear,' said Dr. Sweetapple, 'now my feet are wet.' And they *were* wet, but he went tramping on across bogs and ditches till he came to a house he could see, for it had lights in it and he could hear music. He knocked upon the door.

'Come in,' cried some merry voices, but he did not go in. He just called out: 'Can you put me on my road?'

'Where are you for?' the voices answered.

'World's end,' he replied.

'Come in,' they shouted, 'you're there!'

The latch of the door was lifted and a great light shone out upon Dr. Sweetapple from a country inn. In the doorway stood a policeman with a large belly and a long nose. Behind him was a clown with a red-hot poker, and behind *him* stood Pantaloon and Columbine and Harlequin.

'Holla, boys!' yelled the clown, 'here we are again,' and he drove the red-hot poker clean through Dr. Sweetapple. That did not harm him, not a bit, but he was alarmed when he smelt his own braces burning. Then Columbine linked her arm in his, drew him into the taproom and asked for his business. And he told them that he was seeking Father Christmas, quick, for there'd be the devil and all

to face in no time. Then Columbine kissed him sweetly, but at that the Harlequin drew his sword and with one swipe of it cut clean through Dr. Sweetapple's neck. That did not harm him, not a bit, but he thought the joke was going rather far, as it might have taken the head right off his shoulders, and he was about to say so, when the clown and his party vanished in the air and he was left alone in that taproom with three old grizzled shepherds sitting in the ingle-nook by a grand fire. On the wall above the fireplace was a painted board.

THE WORLD'S END
BY
TOBY TAPTREE
Finest Norfolk Ales.

'Come!' said the three shepherds, rising to their feet. 'We knows your arrant. There's no time to lose.'

The Almanac Man had to follow the three shepherds out-a-doors and athwart a dark hill where their flocks were folded. The night was piercing cold, and the long sharp sky hung over a frozen world.

'Will he be in time?' Dr. Sweetapple asked.

'Yes,' said the old shepherds: 'Christmas will come, sir, because he's the bailiff (so to speak) of the Lord of all, who came to save the world. Here's my lantern, sir, it will help to guide him.' And the first

shepherd climbed up into a tall tree and hung his lantern high. The second went off to the ridge of a stack and hung his lantern wide, but the third set his lantern on an anthill, in case he'd be looking low. Hard on midnight the four men sat watching the skies.

'What do you see? What do you see?' Dr. Sweetapple kept asking.

'I see his star a-travelling,' said the first shepherd, but the doctor could not.

'What do you see?' he asked another. The second man said he could see his flying star, and the third man likewise. Then at last the doctor himself saw the giant figure striding across the sky with wheels of fire on its feet. Like a lovely rocket he curved towards their hill and at length dropped before them in a puff of flame.

'A merry Christmas!' cried the three shepherds.

'Thank you, gentlemen,' said jovial Santa Claus, and he gave them each a purse of gold. 'How do, Sweetapple?' he continued.

'Sir,' said the rejoicing Almanac-maker, 'I never thought to look on you again.'

'Foh!' laughed Father Christmas. 'A little joke of that rascal Old Moore.' He turned and led forward a most beautiful lady. 'But there has been,' he said, 'a little diversion, this year. You know. I . . . ah . . . I've been and got married. Meet the wife!'

He woke early in his bed. The lime tree in the courtyard streamed with the young green light of morning in its leaves. He could see it and it charmed him; spring light, spring days, spring song, with lilac all over the world and the laburnum unmuffling its bunches. A peacock somewhere outside was making its harsh call. He stretched his limbs beneath the amber quilt: pleasantly strange the room looked this morning, it had a naive air; that bowl of blue flower – periwinkle – set between the silver candlesticks in front of the dressing mirror, was very sweet. The dark mahogany seemed to grow admirably from the buff felt upon the floor, and the taffeta curtains at the window, cream-coloured with great purple rings upon them . . . yes . . . yes . . . world without end, and that was a good thing too, but what was he going to do to-day? Where going? Where was he yesterday? What doing? He couldn't remember, things were 'queer' this morning, it was just, just . . . it had a . . . he was hazy about it. It was his room . . . curious . . . curious.

'I'll go and see Nancy to-day,' he said aloud, 'must go and see Nancy at Whitsuntide, always Whitsun with Nancy. What a wonderful girl Nancy is! always the . . .'

His head nestled back upon the pillow as the ghosts of old holidays danced into his mind and

trailed their faint vain garlands about his imagination. That too was a Whitsuntide, the one he had spent with bonny Nell, that time . . . that time . . . it seemed rather long ago, it must have been rather long ago. Yet he could figure it in his mind inch by exquisite inch, very very clearly. How was it he had come to go there, that first and only time, alone? Forgotten! But he knew that he had already taken his degree then, and had been flung into that job at the Exchequer which he so disliked – it was there that the sudden craze to take holy orders and work in some Dominican foundation had come to him. Yes, it was his first bit of a holiday. Off went his mind on a recitative of those unvanishing hours at the farm in Gloucestershire in just such a Whitsuntide as this. He remembered that as he walked up the garden path a slim pink hand from one of the lattices was dropping crumbs to a peacock on the lawn. Then there was a stone-flagged hall, very cool, with a painting of three sheep – quite absurd to remember them! The maid showed him into a room where he found the girl who was feeding the peacock. She turned from the window and his eyes met her wondrous eyes, eyes that gazed at him as if seeking to discover whether he was fine enough to meet their challenge.

'My name's Bobadil.' He remembered how he had spoken his surname with a shrinking sense of its ridiculousness.

'Oh, yes, yes, Luke! I'm Nell. Mrs. Pinkney

didn't expect you quite so soon, she has gone out for a while; but I know all about you, Luke.'

Extraordinarily lovely she was, extraordinarily friendly; she was like a flower nodding at him across a wall. And how her eyes searched his! Not less his own took her admirably in; sweet golden hair, pale skin, the wildest of scarlet lips – and gone was his Dominican prudery in a flash. The marvellous was in their recognition. They moved about the room together as she showed him the old country prints upon the walls, the china in a curious green rack.

'You like pictures?' she asked.

He carefully qualified his admission and discoursed rather floridly about painters of whom she had never heard – Rossetti, Millais.

'What else do you like? Music?' and she tinkled a few notes on the piano. He sat down and played a Brahms Rhapsody, Op. 119, No. 4.

'What does Op. mean?' she asked. He told her, and then played a Chopin Nocturne.

'Is that an Op. too?'

'Yes, 15, No. 3.'

She was enchanted, he had played well! She sat down beside him on a long oak chest.

'What else do you like?'

Her bright eyes that seemed to be mysteriously quivering were close to his; he wanted to say 'You!' That was too much like some ghastly rude boy, but he met her glance and her hand fell upon his with

beautiful deception, as though it were no caress but just a casual touch.

'Tell me what *you* like,' he'd asked.

'Everything,' she said.

'And everybody?' he ventured.

She was silent.

'Me?' he pursued.

She nodded but sprang away from him – Mrs. Pinkney had come in.

The next day was Sunday and he couldn't remember much about it except that something between the girl and himself had seemed to beckon to its appropriate hour. But the following day was full of wonder, they had walked together in the morning. The country was just vaguely hilly, with a grandeur of sweep in its far-stretching outlines. From the down half a dozen forests could be counted, farms by the score, copses and spinneys trailing here and there in the distances as casually as a hedge, a thousand trees looking no mightier than a bush of thorns.

'The world certainly looks round,' he had said.

Nell lay upon the short grass and he beside her with a trembling heart. The sky was riven with clouds, but they never darkened the sun; they moved but to adorn the ridge of the world with scatterings of white wool, spending long reluctant hours while the larks screamed and the blackbirds fluted sadly.

'Come along,' said Nell, suddenly rising. 'I

want to show you somewhere.' And they came to a field that was newly ploughed.

'Come along,' she cried, darting across the furrows. He blundered after and suddenly she had disappeared, for in the middle of the field there was a tiny dell, so cuplike and unexpected that it had baffled the plough and had been left to its native wildness with one or two hawthorns just blooming, a wild rose bush with a few of last year's berries still upon it, a bush of white lilac, cowslips, stitchwort.

'Hidden, quite hidden, aren't we!' cried Nell, lying sidelong with her face pressed along the cowslips.

'Jump in,' she called out. He stood hesitating upon the brink and then slithered down to her.

'Lie down,' she commanded, and he obeyed while she leaned upon her elbows, confronting him with that curious quivering gaze. 'What do you think of it?'

He declared his delight quite handsomely. 'We are quite hidden in the world.'

'It's wonderful when the wheat has grown up around it,' she said.

'We'd have to thread our way through the long stalks then, like the hares do,' he had said.

'But perhaps you'll not be coming here again.'

'If I thought that,' he had said, looking at anything but her, 'I would never leave it.'

'Why not?'

He turned to her but did not answer: no, he had said nothing.

'Why not, Luke?' she repeated urgently. She put her hand upon one of his lying in the grass. It burned like a flake of the sun. Then he quite lost his hesitancy; he laid himself close to her and pulled her face and shoulders upon his body, pressing kisses upon her flaming hair. And just at that moment, close to her feet, he had seen a long snake whipping away from them in the grass towards the bushes.

'Nell!' he cried, startled, springing to his feet, 'there's a snake. Quick, come away!'

'O, it's all right,' she said, still lying there, 'it's gone now.'

But he was terribly frightened; following him out of the dell silently across the furrows she observed his paleness and took his arm fondly, saying: 'It really wouldn't have hurt you, Luke. I've seen it before.'

And he had said whimsically: 'Once see a snake in the grass and your fondness for grass declines.'

At night he bade them all goodbye; he was to leave early in the morning and did not want to disturb the household. At four o'clock he awoke; he could hear horses clumping out of the yard, their jingling chains, and the gruff voice of the man in the dawn. All the birds in the world seemed to be singing. He washed and dressed. It was chilly. He stole down, shoes in hand, to the breakfast-room, where in the darkness, for the blinds were drawn, a red bed of fire still glowed comfortingly in the grate. A small cat lay upon a chair in front of it. He sat

down, laced his shoes, and felt hungry. He got some cake and milk from the larder, and sat down upon the rug in front of the fire. It was very quiet, the clock ticked tremendously. Then a sound upon the stairs; it was Nell, creeping in her dressing-gown. He kissed her white feet that were bare upon the rug before him.

'Luke, Luke, I thought you were gone for ever. Why didn't you come and kiss me good-bye?' she whispered, pressing him to her bosom. 'Why didn't you come? When will you come again?' she cried, searching him with those eyes.

'Soon . . . soon.'

'Ah, but when? Luke, take me with you . . . let me come!'

His straying hands had opened her gown, and her burning beauty had unsealed his very heart. He comforted her, called her his beautiful bride. When he left his face was wet with her tears.

It all came so vividly to the man, Luke Bobadil, lying in his bed, that his heart seemed to melt in her beautiful sorrow, and his palms burned as when they had caressed the adorable girl.

At that moment someone tapped upon his bedroom door.

'Yes . . . yes,' he called testily, and turned over to resume his musing dream.

He did not see Nell again for – O, years it must have been – though he had had her letters, simple beseeching letters. He had kept them, they were

somewhere among his papers, and in them she had idolized him vividly. Every woman at some time or other thinks her lover a man of men; beautiful and soothing to him is the man's realization of this, but O, if he be but a kindergarten Cromwell, how disturbing! He had gone off to America – yes, yes, how strangely his memory played with him this morning – he'd gone to America, and one day in Boston, though her letters had long ceased, the force of her beautiful desire had again touched him and troubled him so urgently that he returned to England and had gone quickly down to the farm.

All was lost, all gone; Mrs. Pinkney was dead, there was a strange name upon the waggons, a new hand upon those fields, and the pleasant house itself rioted with fat children. Dead, dead: and Nell? How easy, how astonishingly easy to lose such a friend in such a crowded world! He had stood in the road with moonlight showering down upon the lilacs and his remembered grief. Fool, fool, fool, he had been a cowardly fool, afraid of Nell, and her beautiful passion, and her wooing eyes! He had felt much as a week-old gosling may feel at its first sight of the wandering, strenuous sea, fearful that she would snatch the idolized virtue out of him. For what other reason had he gone to America? He had come back, O, he had come back, a vague mystical warrant had urged him, and there he was, with the moonlight showering down upon the lilacs, miserably alone and baffled, mysterious desire blazing

like a blown spark. Well would it have been if he had sought no further, and had let the old enchantment die in its own fragrance, but time and its occasions deal such cunning cards, and in the pursuing days he had at last found Nell – found her a bawd.

Ah, what pangs may cleave the hopeless heart, what unendurable remorse! Whether his had been innocent guile or guilty quixotry, from that hour a sense of guilt never left him, he had known a pitiful baseness. For was it not by his own virtue that she had been destroyed? O saintly soul, it was likely enough! Her desire had clung to him, besought him, and he had loved – but he had left her. Without a link with safety or balm for her wounded passion he had left her.

Once more came that tantalizing knock upon the bedroom door, and he heard a voice calling. Springing from the bed he slightly ricked himself and staggered as he stood up on the buff-coloured felt. At the dressing-table his first glance into the mirror stupefied him with tragedy, for he was old, old, his face sere and wrinkled, the indomitable years had not forgotten him though he had momentarily forgotten them. Bald brow, hair scanty and white, he was sixty years old. Foolish, foolish old man, he knew it now, he had lost the hang of time and things, and this day of all days in the year he had thought himself young again! Nell long ago had died in ruin, and Nancy, her sweet child, too was dead.

Throughout his life never again had love come to reward him, the high retributive gods had never pardoned, though his beseeching heart had prayed, ah, how passionately! Trembling he sat down upon the bed, and thinking over the sad tale of Nell his old eyes filled with tears.

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

MR. TRUBELET INVITED SIX OF HIS YOUNG FRIENDS to dine out with him on his fiftieth birthday. As curator of an important department of the National Museum, as archæologist of international repute, you could affect or reserve an admiration for Mr. Trubelet, but as for himself alone he was a nice, queer, quixotic, annoying sort of fellow – and of course his Christian name was Horace. On the fiftieth birthday he met his six young friends – all his friends were young, he seemed for a while to inspire hopeful youth to singular abnegations – met them in the dim stony pleasaunce of Trafalgar Square, and said to each as they came up one by one:

'How good of you to be punctual! Dunne will be here on the 42 'bus and Miss Waley and Miss Wootten on the 127. You have not met before? When we are all here we'll go foraging, like troopers; better than a formal chew, I thought. I've made no arrangements. Picnic. Ha, ha!'

And when the young poet Larry Vaughan came up he said *that* was an idea, Reuben Leaper when *he* came said it was bizarre, and George Dunne was also in accord. So were the three young ladies when they came up to be introduced first to themselves and then to the men they had never met before. But all the same it was a chilly autumn eve; it was, Miss Ackroyd remarked, quite distinctly windy.

'Let us go,' cried Mr. Trubelet then, and they all

went trailing in the wake of Mr. Trubelet and Miss Ackroyd towards the ripe pastures of Soho.

That none of these young people had met before was just one of the annoying contours of Mr. Trubelet's queerness, and where he found them all was just as hard to explain as the reason why he wanted them; their brief exiguous comity seemed to be an end in itself, the only end. Reuben Leaper wondered – he could be heard wondering – why they did not take a taxi. Larry Vaughan wondered – though he could not be heard wondering – about the beauty, the uncommon figure, the speech, the whole delicate compendium of attractions called Miss Waley that now walked excitingly by his side. Miss Ackroyd walked on with Mr. Trubelet, and dark Daphne Wootten was being shared, a little by George Dunne, but principally by the lanky Reuben Leaper, a fellow with a hawklike jowl and a long dark overcoat who had hooked his arm in Daphne's. Already! Larry had taken a dislike to Mr. Leaper. So too had Willow. That was her name, not her real Christian name (which was Florence), but the one she was known by. Everybody, it seemed, in time spontaneously coined the same joke about her name; everybody.

'Yes, it's his red hair,' murmured Willow Waley to Larry Vaughan's comment. 'I thought at first he was a Jew, but I think he is only an Irishman.'

'He's a dentist,' said Larry. 'So Mr. Trubelet told me.'

'I'm a typist.'

'Jolly fun, that.'

'To a diamond merchant!'

'O, it's marvellous.' And Mr. Vaughan caught Miss Waley's arm in his own, retaining it closely, and in a wave of emotion swore to himself so intensely that he would gladly die for this lovely creature that the vow was almost audible. And it seemed as if she divined this feeling, as inexplicable as it was sudden, and owned in mute mysterious response that she too would do nearly as much for him. Upon her cheeks bloomed the rose and lily that wear the tone of everlasting purity; a black beret was pulled sideways upon her golden hair, a dark jacket clipped her elegant outline, and a black and white check skirt hung to her knees. There were shoes of some sort on her divine feet – of course, there must have been – but her divine legs in their light silk stockings so distracted him that his eyes, observant poet though he was, scarcely noticed them.

'Let us go,' cried Mr. Trubelet when they were almost there, 'to Soho!' And as they went on towards Soho Mr. Trubelet turned and inquired loudly if any of them knew of a quiet and quite foreign café. Larry Vaughan said that he did.

'Take me there,' cried Mr. Trubelet, and in a short time the young poet had conducted the party to a café as Italian as everything save climate could make it. A head waiter emerged upon them, smoothed some tables and caressed certain chairs,

but Mr. Trubelet would have none of them, not one. His face was plain but provokingly bland, and upon his head rested an exasperating hat. He momentarily consented to an arrangement of two tables placed side by side, but then he gasped:

'Foo! It is stifling in here. This red plush is so exultant, I cannot bear it. My heart will burst, it smells like a barber's. We must go elsewhere, don't you think? Come!'

And tearing them from the head waiter as he would have torn a lamb from the claws of a butcher he trotted them all into the street again, where they baa-ed in a flock upon the pavement. Mr. Trubelet was incalculably like that: taste, exquisite taste, flipped its tyrannical knout and Mr. Trubelet heard things or felt things or smelt things that are not in the common experience. Art, the blue dome of heaven, primitive simplicities, the wind among the reeds, were his rubrications. Horace Trubelet was the kind of man who imported sterilized toothpicks and kept them wrapped in certified germ-proof cases, and he wanted to sit on hard hand-made chairs, and churn his own butter.

Mr. Trubelet asked if anyone else knew of a good café, and George Dunne said ' Yes.'

'Take us there,' cried Mr. Trubelet, and in a trice they were all seated in a café that was as Spanish as wallpaper and placards could make it.

'But God!' gasped Mr. Trubelet as he scanned the carte, 'this menu is full of offal. We can't . . . we

cannot . . . I'm sorry, Dunne, we might go elsewhere? Come!'

Again Mr. Trubelet's birthday party issued forth and cumbered the windy pavement.

'Now let me see,' the celebrant brightly ruminated. 'Where . . . where . . . but no, I can't think. Where on earth have all the cafés gone to? Leaper, do you know of one?'

Mr. Leaper hoarsely remarked that he thought not, but that he might, given time, be able to put his hand on a nice dairy. Behind the others Willow clutched Larry's arm with a perceptible shiver.

'I'm dying,' said she.

'Let's bolt,' he whispered.

'Could we?' Willow hesitated. 'No, not yet.'

For a moment they gazed so silently and so closely at each other that passers-by might have thought them kissing.

Now they were all going to Miss Ackroyd's club in the purlieus of Bloomsbury, and soon they went into her club and sat down at a long table, three-a-side, with Mr. Trubelet at the end.

'Too much tile on the tables,' moaned Willow in Mr. Vaughan's ear.

'And too much linoleum on the floor,' retorted he. Saving their presences it was a devitalized dining-room that almost purred with floor polish. The chairs were high and rigid, the pottery ardently rustic. Upon the mantelpiece an oval mirror sat in a mud-coloured frame between two brass candlesticks,

and beside it was a calendar with the day's quotation extracted from Mr. Ruskin.

Fate had led them to this haven on the very day that the club cook took her evening off. At this revelation Mr. Leaper bellowed 'Ha, ha!' and showed his exquisite teeth. As he sat there with his elbows on the table and his jowl smiling so widely he seemed to Mr. Larry Vaughan to be occupying a disorderly amount of space.

'What *can* we have?' inquired Mr. Trubelet of Miss Ackroyd, and it transpired that the club's o'erweening culinary pride lay in the texture, the quality, and the edibility of its omelettes, in the preparation of which it claimed to have a secret. Thereupon Mr. Trubelet told the story of the philosopher Condorcet who was guillotined during the French Revolution because he did not know how an omelette was made. After that nobody had the hardihood to object to omelettes save Leaper, who said they always sat sideways on him, so the palate of Mr. Leaper was placated with an excellent heap of spaghetti.

'What shall we drink?' inquired Mr. Trubelet blandly, but there Miss Ackroyd had to stun the company with the information that no intoxicants were ever supplied in the club.

'What, never!' bellowed Leaper.

'Never,' said Miss Ackroyd with a fixed or almost fixed smile. She was one of those persons who often told people that she was *not* one of those persons who did this, that, or the other etc., etc.

'Ha, ha!' issued again from the midst of Mr. Leaper's radiant teeth.

Well, Mr. Trubelet ordered some cider, there was nothing else to order. 'Let us have it in a bowl,' he begged, and they had it in a bowl, from which he and Miss Ackroyd took copious draughts. 'Very cool and refreshing,' they said. Once at least Reuben Leaper did likewise; raising the bowl on high he bowed towards Willow Waley and intoned:

'*A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou!*'

A frugal meal is soon ended, and at just the right moment Mr. Trubelet said:

'Shall we move on elsewhere for coffee?'

'Yes,' cried Leaper at once. 'Let's go to *The Drunken Sailor*.'

'No, no!' cried a shocked Mr. Trubelet. 'The place has a disgusting air. I scent Priapus.'

Leaper was astounded. 'Well, I never heard that before.'

'One hears so little,' said Mr. Trubelet gently, admonishingly, 'in a world so big.'

'But what's wrong there?' asked the other.

'Tone, my dear boy, tone. It is so difficult to be right, and so easy to be wrong. Come.'

Having with the connivance of Miss Ackroyd paid the bill, he led his party forth. As they proceeded in the wake of Mr. Trubelet Leaper contrived to join Larry and Willow, who were walking together, and hooking his arm in Willow's he talked to her in a way that distressed the young poet, a

familiar way, with a Drunken Sailor tone, a Priapic tone, and it distressed Mr. Vaughan still more that Willow seemed to enjoy this. Mr. Trubelet took them into a respectable tea-room, gave them coffee, and then escorted the whole party dreadfully back to Trafalgar Square, where they came to a 'bus-stop.

'Here Willow! Daphne!' he immediately cried. 'Your bus! On with you. Good night!' And in a flash the two girls were hustled on to an omnibus that bore them both away. The little poet, stunned by this unforeseen calamity and bewildered by the traffic, stood stock-still, legless. Why did he not fly after that omnibus? He dared not, though he knew that he was thus losing Willow Waley for ever, and reviled himself for such miserable unhandiness; he dared not. The beastly Trubelet, scenting God knew what, had designedly separated them, designedly! Silently there was called down upon that gentleman's head (he was so affably chaffing Miss Ackroyd) every blasting evil that could occur to a poet's mind, the boils, the blains, murrains and vipers, all the plagues of Egypt, Inquisitorial tortures, and punishment of the damned. Because now he would never be able, of course he would never be able, to ask Trubelet for Willow's address, he was not gifted with such effrontery, he was not, and if he were gifted Mr. Trubelet wouldn't tell him. But he was not. So again he pleaded for strangulation and death by fire for Mr. Trubelet, and for himself hoped the best that he did not, and never could, deserve.

George Dunne had gone, he had simply disappeared, Leaper stood humming, and then Larry Vaughan's omnibus arrived.

'Good night, good night, good night,' they all shouted, and Larry jumped on and was borne away.

'My God!' boomed a familiar voice behind him, 'much of that would put me in my grave.'

It was Reuben Leaper, and as they sat down together he continued: 'What is it – that thing like parricide – when you are tempted (Two penny ones, please, conductor) to smite the avuncular in all its humid bloom?'

Vaughan could not remember; he could only recall a face forever gone, lovely as a flower. Five minutes ago they were together, they had lived an age, they were deeply in love – and now! Heaven and hell, what a merciless tragedy! But all tragedies are merciless; stupidity, ignorance, things like Trubelet, all are merciless. It wouldn't be likely that this fool Leaper knew her address.

'You know,' the terrific Leaper was booming, 'that Horace thinks he's a lion-tamer. Yes. He keeps putting his head into the mouths of things that look like lions, and he's quite annoyed when they don't bite his head off.'

Five minutes ago, as lovely as a flower.

'Cider!' gasped Leaper. 'Spaghetti!!'

The omnibus stopped: 'Hi, come, we get off here,' said Leaper, rising.

Said Larry: 'I've further to go. Good night.'

'But you're coming to Dunne's, aren't you? He told me to tell you, I must have told you. We're all going to Dunne's – all bar the Ackroyd and the Trubelet. Must have told you, but don't come if . . .'

They scrambled off the omnibus together.

'I don't know Dunne's place,' said Vaughan.

'Neither do I, but it's somewhere round here. He's genial, I tell you, genial; I give you the password, boy, he's genial.'

They came to a block of flats near a hospital, and ascending to a high floor knocked at a door where there was music and went in. George Dunne was dancing with Daphne and Willow Waley lolled on a large divan that was covered with jade-green velvet. She was nursing a human skull. Vaughan was so shocked with delight at the vision of her that he dared not greet her, and to hide his emotion stared at anything else in the high white room, at the gramophone on the table recording a Charleston dance, at the walls of the room covered with great mirrors and huge unframed lithographs of the arteries, veins and muscles of the human system. From the books heaped on the floor it was clear that George Dunne was a medical student. Shyly he welcomed them and helped them to drinks of which he had a remarkable and choice supply. Leaper swallowed a glass of whisky as if it were water and then, as the gramophone started again, he pounced upon Willow,

dragged her from the divan and danced with her to the further mortification of Mr. Vaughan, who groaned to himself despairingly:

'Why is it that a person like me can be so trodden upon by a viper of a dentist, a mere molar-mechanic? Why! Why is it! Life is so preposterous!'

But just then Willow, swaying along gracefully against the dentist's abdomen, threw a glance at Vaughan that flushed his arteries and veins and muscles with a strange fiery cordial, dissolving all his rancour.

The twirling of the dance, the warm room, and quantities of whisky soon worked their will upon Leaper and he grew tipsy in a mild jocular way. Striding and stumbling about the floor while the others reclined on the divan, he began to declaim with amusing mock oratory.

'They bound (hup), how solemnly they bound! Nothing in it, nothing in it at all. I throw that skull up into the air and it falls back to me. I throw my thoughts upwards against the sky and they come back to the earth. What do you think? – can I ever throw myself into heaven? Or am I in a trap? Is it illusion?'

He paused in front of Vaughan, who now sat nursing the skull.

'Tell me, sir, will you have illusion or truth?'

Vaughan was put out of countenance by this direct approach, he had no gifts of effrontery, and so he replied as seriously as he could:

'If it is an illusion we can love, and if it is common to all, it has the validity of truth.'

'Does truth grow out of its own shadow then?' demanded the orator. 'Ah, delightful lady!' he burbled on at Willow, 'I look towards whether or not if it does if it does not. Can the go from it yes be differently before as the space shall dream it exactly? Still however, and why? This room, that skull, these shades of protoplasmic passion, that lovesick boy, this damn gramophone, how they bound, how solemnly they bound on the everlasting journey! Can you tell? Can it be told at last Wednesday? As Friday week can it be told woefully? Assume, assume a reference. Until the clockface measures its own graving-iron I look towards whether or no if it does and it speak sweetly. A penny, lady! For the love of all, a penny, bless you!'

There is no denying that his rhodomontade amused the girls. And it amused Dunne. Vaughan however began to ask George questions about anatomy, so Dunne led the poet to one of the lithographs and began to demonstrate. Leaper flung himself down beside the two girls, who began to ply him with ironical questions. At last he said: 'I'm an agnostic.'

'Ah, we're all agnostics now,' chirped Willow.

'I question that,' drawled Leaper nasally. 'I'm all for religion in the good old (hup) fashioned sense, substantial and everlasting, solid as the Tower of

London. It is only upon moral issues that I keep an open mind.'

'Why an open mind?' asked Willow.

'I expect he keeps open house,' giggled Daphne.

'I am a conformist in religion,' said Leaper loudly, 'a good Catholic, but in morals I'm an agnostic because. . . . no, I will not tell you why, no.'

'O, do,' they both implored, 'please!' And so he told them, while Larry, still fondling the skull, was trying to follow an exposition by the medical student. Dunne's studies had reached the epigastric region, and he could discourse very amiably about kidneys, but through his somewhat obfuscating screen of pure knowledge there pressed the tantalizing clamour of the agreeable dentist.

'Life,' boomed Reuben Leaper, 'is concerned fundamentally with three things, and three things only – love, religion and morals.'

There was a moment's pause during which George explained to Larry that he had not two kidneys but thousands.

'What about business?' Daphne asked.

'Och, business,' protested Leaper. 'Business is a means t'enable us live agreeably with these three things. The ends of life are love, religion (hup), morals.'

'Why do you separate them?' asked Willow.

'What has love to do with morals?' said Daphne.

'There, you've said it!' he replied to Daphne with a sort of hushed brightness. 'Just nothing, nothing

at all; that is why I'm nagnostic. Frailty, thy name (hup) is woman!'

'How true!' sneered Willow.

'Well, so 'tis,' he insisted.

'If you're agnostic in morals,' Daphne asked, 'what are you in love?'

'Ah,' he sighed, 'like all men, in love I'm a fool. Orthodox in religion, gnostic in morals, fool in love. Um.'

The girls nodded in cordial assent.

'You are very often in love?' pursued Daphne.

'I'm, I'm 'fectionate nature, you know.'

'Well,' Daphne mystically commented, 'I say there's a lot to be said for some things, but you can't possibly justify the ways of God to women.'

'I'm very 'fectionate nature,' he brooded, 'yes, yes, I am, I own it, but I tell you – my thoughts often reproach me. O,' he shouted, jumping up, 'how we bound, how solemnly we bound, on the everlasting journey.' He wound up the gramophone and dragged Willow into a dance once more. George and Daphne followed. Larry, not knowing what else to do, still fondling the skull, wandered to a corner of the room and carefully stood the skull upon the floor; then he stood wrapt in contemplation of some pictured viscera. The music finished and the dancers sank in a heap together upon the divan. Larry turned to the gramophone to restart the music and he could hear Leaper murmuring to Willow 'You are enchanting. There is nothing in the world more

beautiful than you. I say, Willow, come out with me and let us spend the night together.'

'O, thanks,' she languidly replied, 'I think not.'

Leaper began to fondle her knee.

'Do, my angel,' he begged.

Willow withdrew her limb with gracious adroitness and said, 'I'd really rather not.'

'Ah, Willow, let us spend the night in sin.'

'No, I don't care to,' said the girl with a bored air, 'really.'

'Why not?'

'Well, for one thing, I'm not an agnostic in morals.'

'Pah!' he snorted contemptuously. At that Larry bent over and struck him in the face. The girls and George immediately scrabbled off the divan, but Leaper merely sat up, snatched a handkerchief from his pocket, and murmuring 'You're rather hasty!' leaned forward to nurse a bleeding nose. Larry stood confronting him, glaring down upon him, and incidentally looking more of a fool than the other.

'We must go,' said Daphne and Willow to George Dunne, and they began putting on their hats.

'But wait,' cried George to Daphne. 'I will see you home.' Turning to Leaper he continued. 'You're a bit upset, old man. Wouldn't you rather sleep here to-night? I can give you a shake-down.'

'No, no thanks,' boomed the other. 'I must go. I've got an assignation at seven to-morrow morning.'

He put on his long overcoat, ignoring Larry.

'An assignation!' tittered George.

'Yes,' he said gloomily.

'At seven in the morning!'

'Yes, with Christ Jesus. I've to go to mass. Good night.'

And away he went.

Willow put her arm on Larry's, who stood as still as a post, having said not a word since he struck the blow.

'Come,' she said. After bidding the others adieu they walked along to a tube station together, and as they went he said aloud: 'Was it worth it?'

'It will teach him a lesson,' said Willow.

'I don't,' stammered Larry, 'quite mean that.' And she, divining some reproach in his meaning, did not press him further.

Their carriage was empty except for a poor woman in black who sat opposite them and mourned, a decayed woman with a wall-eye, and a funeral wreath wrapped in a paper-bag beside her. She had on tight glacé shoes, and her hands were pitiful and gnarled; she left them uncovered and clasped her cotton gloves to her breast. Alas, poor ugly thing! where could she be going, at midnight with a wreath? Alas!

This mood kept them both mute after they had left the train and emerged in the dark streets of tall houses and closed shops. There were no sounds and a sort of remoteness had descended upon the city. The street lamps gleamed away from them in a

diminishing endlessness, and one or two dark figures came towards them and passed by. Up aloft the stars sparkled with a tiny violence. The two came to a house and stood on a flight of steps leading under a portico to a forbidding door. In this secrecy she slipped into his arms.

'Yes, yes,' she nodded, 'I dearly love you.' And she told him softly how she adored him for defending her. Vaughan was subdued by that, but he said: 'I hit him really because I was jealous.'

'Jealous?'

'Yes, of what he was asking you.'

'My love,' murmured the girl, 'he didn't get it. I told him no – what more could I do?'

A cruel thought writhed in his brain: 'Had I not been there she would have answered him Yes,' but he ground it out of his consciousness and kissed her with fury and fondled her. Her cheeks were so cool in that night air.

'Come quietly, up to my room,' she whispered, stirring from him.

He shook his head, thoughtfully staring at her. 'No.'

Then brusquely she said: 'I must go in.'

'Good night, Willow.'

'Good night, Larry.' She paused, fumbling for a key. 'I don't agree about religion and morals; but tell me, do you think there is anything in the world better than love?'

'Yes,' he said.

'What?'

'My secret thoughts.'

'Secret! Ah, protect us women from the secret thoughts of men. I scent Priapus!'

'No, no.'

'But yes, yes,' she insisted hotly.

'They are secret only because I can't express them,' he said slowly. 'They are full of the mystery of life,' he said.

'The things men think of!' sighed the girl. Her key was fitted in the lock, and she turned it. 'Your thoughts may change some day.' As she gently touched open the door he snatched her back to his embrace and murmured:

'My lovely one, with your image in my heart they my change and change and change, but when my thoughts reproach me I will live no longer.'

He let her go, and the closing door slowly parted them.

'I can't understand,' sighed the trembling girl, groping her way up the dark staircase, 'but, oh, I shall be dreadfully fond of him. I wish, I wish . . . I wish he was a little more of an agnostic.'

NABOTH BIRD AND GEORGE ROBINS WERE VERY FOND of foot-racing. Neither of them was a champion runner, but each loved to train and to race – that was their pastime, their passion, their principal absorption and topic of conversation; occasionally it brought one or the other of them some sort of trophy.

One August Bank Holiday in the late nineties they travelled fifty miles to compete in a town where prizes of solid cash were to be given instead of the usual objects of glittering inutility. The town was a big town with a garrison and a dockyard. It ought to have been a city, and it would have been a city had not the only available cathedral been just inside an annoying little snob of a borough that kept itself (and its cathedral: admission sixpence) to itself just outside the boundaries of the real and proper town. On their arrival they found almost the entire populace wending to the carnival of games in a long stream of soldiers, sailors, and quite ordinary people, harried by pertinacious and vociferous little boys who yelled: 'Programme?' and blind beggars who just stood in the way and said nothing. Out of this crowd two jolly girls, Margery and Minnie, by some pleasant alchemy soon attached themselves to our two runners. Margery and Minnie were very different from each other. Why young maidens who hunt in couples and invariably dress alike should differ as much in character and temperament as

Boadicea and Mrs. Hemans affords a speculation as fantastic as it is futile. They were different from each other, as different as a sherry cobbler and pine-apple syrup; but they were not more different than were the two lads. The short snub one was Nab Bird, a mechanic by trade, with the ambition of a bus conductor; he sold bicycle tyres and did odd things to perambulators in a shed at the corner of a street. The demure Minnie became his friend. George Robins, a cute good-looking clerk, devoted his gifts of gallantry to Margery, and none the less readily because she displayed some qualities not commonly associated with demureness.

'From London you come!' exclaimed George. 'How'd you get here?'

The young lady crisply testified that she came in a train – did the fathead think she had swum? They were jolly glad when they got here, too and all. Carriage full, and ructions all the way.

'Ructions! What ructions?'

'Boozy men! Half of 'em trying to cuddle you.'

Mr. Robins intimated that he could well understand such desires. Miss Margery retorted that then he was understanding much more than was good for him. Mr. Robins thought not, he hoped not. Miss Margery indicated that he could hope for much more than he was likely to get. Mr. Robins replied that he would do that, and then double it. And he asserted, with all respect, that had he but happily been in that train he, too, might have, etc.,

and so on. Whereupon Miss Margery snapped Would he? and Mr Robins felt bound to say Sure!

'Would you – well, I'll tell you what I did to one of them.' And she told him. It was quite unpleasant.

'Lady!' cried George sternly, 'I hope you won't serve me like that.'

''Pends on how you behave.'

'How do you want me to behave?'

'Well, how *should* you behave to a lady?'

''Pends on what's expected of me.' George delivered it with a flash of satisfaction.

'O, go on,' she retorted; 'you're as bad as the rest of 'em. It depends really on what is expected of *me*, don't it?'

'O, you're all right,' he replied; 'you're as good as they make 'em.'

'How do you know?'

'Well, ain't you?'

'I'm as good as I *can* be. Is that good enough for you?'

''Pends on how good that is.'

Margery declared her unqualified abhorrence of his sort of goodness.

'I'm all right when I *am* all right,' George assured her.

'I know all about you!' There was a twinkle in her eyes.

'Do you!' interjected Nab. 'Then you know more than he'd like his mother to know.'

They arrived at the sports field. Already there

were ten thousand people there, and the bookmakers having assembled their easels, cards, and boxes, were surrounded by betting men. The space adjacent to the arena was occupied by a gala fair, with round-abouts, shies, booths, swings, and other uproarious seductions. The track was encircled by a wedge of onlookers, ironic or enthusiastic. The sports began, runners came and went, the bookmakers stayed and roared, the hurdy-gurdies lamented or rejoiced; the vanquished explained their defeats in terms which brought grins of commiseration to the faces of the victors, who explained their successes in terms which brought gleams of pride and triumph into the eyes of all who attended them. Very beautiful and bright the day was; the air smelt of grass, fusees and coker-nuts. Amongst those scantily garbed figures on the track Margery and Minnie scarcely recognized the young men they had accompanied, and for a long time they were unaware that George had won the third prize in a mile race.

Like all the other prize-winners, he was subjected to the extravagant cajoleries of Jerry Chambers, a cockney ruffian living by his wits – a calling that afforded him no very great margin of security. He had lost his money, he was without a penny, and in the dressing-room he fastened himself upon Robins and Bird in an effort to obtain something or other, little or much, from each or either.

'I tell you,' he darkly whispered, 'the winner of the mile is a stiff 'un.'

'What's a stiff 'un?' inquired Nab Bird.

'A stiff 'un! What a stiff 'un is!' Chambers' amusement at this youth's boundless ignorance was shrill and genuine. 'Why, he's run under an assumed name and got about sixty yards the best of the handicap. You was third in that race, Robins, and the winner was a stiff 'un. Make it worth my while and I'll get him pinched for impersonation. Know him! – I knew his father! I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll get the second man disqualified as well – how will that stand you? Give me a dollar now so I can lodge the objection at once, and the first prize must be awarded to you – it must. A five-pound note, ain't it? I backed you to win myself, and I don't like losing my money to a stiff 'un – I took ten pound to two about you. Now half a dollar won't hurt you. You won't! Well, good God Almighty!' – Chambers tilted his hat over one eye and scratched his neck – 'don't let me try to persuade you. Lend us a tanner.'

'To hell with you!'

'Make it eighteen pence then.'

They did not. At the distribution of the prize-money, there was much ringing of a bell, shouting of names, and some factitious applause as a pert and portly lady of title appeared at a table in front of the pavilion to perform the ceremony. It was the only titled person our friends had ever seen, and the announcement of her grand name and the sound of her voice, despite her appearance – for though she was a countess she had a stomach like a publican's

wife – affected them occultly. A very gentlemanly steward, in private life a vendor of fish, bawled out the names of the prize-winners, and when it came to the turn of George Robins he was surprised to hear:

'Third prize in the Mile Race: W. Ballantyne.'

He hesitated.

'It's wrong, O George!' gasped Nab Bird. 'It's a mistake.'

Nobody responding to the call for W. Ballantyne, George suddenly exchanged hats with his friend. Giving Nab his tweed cap, he seized Nab's bowler hat and, although it was far too small, put it on his own head where it looked much as it would have done on the bust of Homer.

'What . . . George, what?' asked his bewildered friend amid the chuckles of the two girls; but without stopping to explain, George Robins pushed his way through the crowd, advanced to the table, and received in the name of W. Ballantyne his own prize of a sovereign, which he acknowledged by just raising his terrible headgear and blowing his nose with a large handkerchief.

'Thanks, Nab,' said he, returning to his friends. 'I'll have my cap again.'

The presentation concluded, the lady of title shook hands with the gentleman fishmonger, and they went, presumably, their separate ways, while part of the crowd drifted gaily over to the fair booths and the rest went home to tea. With a mysterious,

preoccupied air, George directed Nab to take the girls into a tent for tea and await him there.

'We'll look after him,' declared Minnie, linking her arm with Nab's.

'But where you going, O George?' exclaimed the puzzled one, as Margery, too, linked an arm in his.

'See you later – five minutes, only five minutes. Take him away,' shouted the departing George to the girls; 'give him a bun and don't let him make his face jammy.'

So Nab went to tea with the girls, and says he:

'I wonder what he's up to?'

'Didn't he run well?' said Minnie.

'Beautiful,' agreed Margery.

'I don't want no tea,' declared Nab, 'I'm 'ot; but I'll have a couple of them saveloys, and then for a glass of ice cream-o. But you have just what you like, Minnie and Margery.'

They had what they could get, and then, as Nab for the twentieth time was audibly wondering what George was 'up to,' and Margery for the dozenth time was realizing how splendidly he had run, George himself reappeared beaming with satisfaction.

'Where you been to, O George?'

'Been to get my prize.'

'What prize?'

'In the mile.'

'Third prize?'

'Didn't I win it?'

'But you got that before, didn't you?'

'Did I?'

'Well, 'aven't you?'

'Have I?'

Nab was mistified, George was triumphant. 'I'll explain it to you. Listen, O little Naboth. That third prize was awarded by some mischance to a chap the name of Ballantyne. Well, there wasn't any Ballantyne won that prize. The winner was G. Robins – that's me.'

'Yes.'

'So I go to the secretary of the sports and I say to him, "Excuse me, sir, I'm George Robins. I won third prize in the mile, but there has been a mistake, and the prize has been given to someone called Ballantyne. What am I to do?" Well, there was a lot of palavering and running about and seeing stewards, but at last they found out that what I said was absolutely true and so they gave me another sovereign.'

'Two lots of prize-money you got, then!' ejaculated Nab; 'two quid!'

George nodded modestly. 'And they apologized for the mistake!'

'My goodness, isn't he . . .!' remarked Margery admiringly to Minnie, and Minnie, too, appeared to think he was . . .! But Nab was perturbed. Margery's observation – 'All's fair in love and war!' – did not seem very pertinent to Nab, and he corrected her:

'Love and war's one thing, sport's another.'

'Sport!' exclaimed George. 'But you know what these professionals are, you daren't trust 'em.

Jerry Chambers, now: how about him if you met him on a dark night, eh? Any of these professionals would cut your throat for fivepence. They'd bag your boots and bone your bag, and your skin too if you wasn't chained up inside it.'

'Yes, O George, I know, but it wasn't them you done it to: it's the committee.'

'Their look out, ain't it? Their own mistake, not mine! It wasn't my mistake, now was it?'

'Well, no, but it's a bit like what Jerry Chambers might have done himself.'

Margery interposed: 'I think it was jolly smart, but you were a confederate – you lent him your hat.'

'Of course! I borrowed that for disguise, see! But you shall share the swag, little Naboth; so don't keep grumbling and grumbling. Here's your half-a-james.' Saying which George stretched out a hand to his friend, who saw lying upon his palm a glittering sovereign. 'Give me change for half of that!'

The girls sparklingly approved this offer of the magnanimous one; but Nab, a little confused, turned away saying:

'No, thanks, George, O man; no, thanks.'

Although they all surrounded Nab and tried to cajole him into acceptance, the little man was adamant – Very kind of George, but he'd rather not. However, they all went away very amiably together, and it was apparent to Naboth Bird that his friend's questionable manœuvre was acclaimed by the girls as an admirable exploit, while his own qualms were

regarded as an indecent exhibition of an honesty no less questionable.

Moving idly down a hill amongst the stream of people, they were brought to a standstill at the edge of a crowd surrounding an old blind beggar and his wife. The man was playing a hymn tune on a tin pipe. Tall and ragged, with white thin beard and clerical hat, there was the strange dignity inseparable from blindness in his erect figure; but his shuffling wife, older and very feeble, held his arm with one hand and outstretched the other for the few pitying pence that came to them. George and his friends were astonished to perceive the ruffian Jerry Chambers standing mockingly in front of the beggars. His arms were spread out to the halting people, his hat had been flung upon the ground before him; he was making excruciating gestures and noises with his hands and mouth, yodelling like a costermonger and performing ridiculous antics to gain their attention. He was entirely successful; the good-natured holiday folk assembled and stretched across the road in a great crowd. With an ironical gesture of the hand Chambers directed the attention of the onlookers to the forlorn couple behind him.

'Look at 'em!' he yelled. 'Look at 'em – roll, bowl, or pitch – but look at 'em! Did ever you see such a thing in your lives?'

He paused for a moment, and then recommenced very gently: 'People, men of my own fraternity! I ain't doing this bit of a job for myself – nor for no

blarney – nor for no bank-holiday rag. I'm a doing this – just five minutes – for my compatriarch and his noble consort. Look at 'em, I say. I bin a-looking at 'em – I 'ad to – and it just breaks my heart. Well, you're not a brass-bellied lot – you don't look it – *your* hearts ain't made of tripe. So that's where I've pushed in.'

The old man had forborne his solemn piping; he blinked his sightless eyes unobjectively upon the people, while his partner clung to him with both arms, bewildered and a little terrified.

'I am going,' Chambers began to roar again, 'to sing you a comical song. Shall then, if my old compatriarch will oblige with a tootle on his bangalorum, shall then dance you a jig. Shall then crawl upon my hands and knees, barking like a tiger, with my cady in me mouth to collect bullion for this suffering fambly. Look at 'em, lord alive! Look at 'em!'

After singing so raucous and ridiculous a song that his kindly intentions were nearly defeated, Chambers poised himself for the jig.

'Righto, play up, uncle!'

But the old beggar could only repeat the one tune – his hymn called 'Marching to Zion.'

'God a'mighty! 'ark at 'im!' cried the baffled Chambers. 'Well, you people, men of my own fraternity, it's no go; 'ere's my cadging 'at – give us a good whip round for those two old bits of mutton!'

So the old man piped his hymn while the cockney ruffian begged and bullied a handful of money for

them. Chaffing and scolding he approached George; Margery was searching for a coin.

'It's all right,' whispered George to her; 'it's all right.' He showed her the coin already in his fingers – the glittering questionable sovereign. She clutched his arm to prevent such a sacrifice, but she was too late. George dropped the coin into Chambers' hat and then, curiously shamefaced, at once walked away in a little drift of pleased excitement.

'Min, Min, d'you know what he's done!' cried Margery to the friends as they all followed after him. 'He's given 'em that sovereign.'

In the eyes of the dazzled girls the gesture crowned George with the last uttermost grace, and even Nab was mute before its sublimity. They hurried away as if the devil himself might be coming to thrust the sovereign back upon them.

And Chambers? His triumph, too, was great. The well-used occasion had won its well-devised reward, and his pleasure, though modestly expressed, was sincere.

'Ladies and gennermen,' cried the jolly ruffian, a few minutes later as he counted up the coin, 'I thank you one and all for your kindness to this old couple and the very handsome collection (Here y'are, uncle,' he whispered, 'it's splendid: eight shillings and fo'pence). All correct, thank you, ladies and gennermen. God bless the lot of yer.' And then, leaving the delighted beggars to their gains, and murmuring to himself 'Beau-tiful, beau-tiful Zi-on!' he hurried rapidly away.

THE PRESSER

TWO OR THREE YEARS AFTER THE FIRST JUBILEE OF Queen Victoria a small ten-year-old boy might have been seen slouching early every morning along the Mile End Road towards the streets of Whitechapel. Johnny Flynn was a pale boy of pinched appearance – for although his black coat was a size too large for him, his black trousers were a size too small – he was not very well, and he was tired. Plodding along from his aunt's house miles away in Hackney, he sometimes drowsily ran into things: things like sauntering policemen (who were ductile and kind) or letter boxes (that were not). A policeman genially shook him.

'Ay! Where ye going?'

'Going to work, sir.'

'Work! What work do ye work at?'

'Mr. Alabaster's, a tailor, sir.'

'Oh, a tailor! Mind he don't put ye under a thimble and suffocate ye. Get along with it, and don't go knocking people down's if ye was popping off to Buckingham Palace!'

Johnny wanly smiled as he said 'No,' and 'Good morning, sir.'

It was generally a letter-box, though, and after such a mishap one day he had gone into a public lavatory. There he had seen a bad word chalked up on the wall – a very bad word. Johnny Flynn knew all about bad words although he had never uttered

them; his mind shrank from them as a snail shrinks when you spit on it. But this time he went on his way with the bad word chanting in his mind – he could *not* but listen to it, he was absorbed by it; and the very next letter-box he came to he said it out boldly and loud, seven times, to the letter-box. And one day he dropped his packet of dinner into the mouth of one of those letter-boxes.

Well, when he came to Whitechapel there was Leman Street, and off Leman Street there were other streets full of shops with funny names over the windows, like Greenbaum, Goldansky, Finesilver and Artzibashev, and shops full of foreign food that looked nasty and smelled, or full of objects that seemed vaguely improper. There were hundreds of clattering carts bedazing him, and women who were drunk at eight o'clock in the morning sat on doorsteps with their heads in their hands. And they smelled, too. Very soon now he reached a high dull building that hoarded a barracks of prolific Jewish families, and ascending one flight of its sticky stone stairs he came to a standstill outside a door in a dark passage. There he had to wait until Mr. Sulky, who was the presser and had the key, arrived. Mr. Sulky was a big dark young man with a pale pitted face, who lodged in an eating house, went for long walks on Sundays, and passed for a misogynist. The rest of his time he spent in pressing trousers with a large hot-iron goose.

Johnny said: 'Good morning, sir.'

Mr. Sulky said: 'Huh!' but he always said it with a faint smile.

The first business in the tailor's workshop was to light the fire, a great fire maintained with coke. Then, to sweep the room clean of its countless fragments of cloth and cotton. Heaping these in a wooden box, the boy staggered with it across the dark passage into a smaller apartment with a window, the very symbol of gloom, looking down into a dank yard where he could see people all day long going to the privy. The room contained only a colossal pile of cloth clippings covering the whole floor, and it was his unending task to sort these into their various kinds. The pile never lessened, it seemed to grow with absorbent inexorable growth. Sometimes he could scarcely enter the door to get into the room; and that implacable mountain of rags was watered with the tears of his childish hungers and despairs. He emptied the box and returned to the workshop.

Eight or nine women came in and began their work of making trousers. A massive table stood in the middle; the women sat round three sides of the room on old empty boxes – these were less comfortable than chairs, but more convenient. The room was large and well lighted from two windows. In summer the windows were a blessing to the women, the hot fire an affliction; in winter it was otherwise. Sometimes they sweated, and sometimes they sneezed or they coughed, but they never shivered. Each woman had a pad of needles tacked to her bodice, a

pair of scissors and skeins of thread in her lap, and her hands were busied with the garments of men she knew nothing about. Each had a wedding ring on her nuptial finger, the beginnings of a hump on her shoulders, and the deuce knows what emotions in her heart. They were mostly young women, but they looked old, whereas Mr. Sulky and Mr. Alabaster were young and looked young. It reminded Johnny of the question propounded by a famous advertisement:

Why does a woman look old
sooner than
a man?

And the answer was something to do with soap.

His favourite was certainly Helen, she was handsomest. Johnny liked her, she had a pretty freckled face and a big bosom, and was tall and fair. Johnny admired her, though she was not kind to him and effusive like old Mrs. Grainger. Indeed she was in some ways, he thought, rather unkind and slightly haughty, but her smile was lovely. She was married to a bottle-washer named Smithers, and they had a little girl Hetty, six or seven years old, with weak eyes and heavy boots, who often came and sat on the stairs waiting for her mother. Mrs. Grainger was a wrinkled crone who got drunk on Saturday nights in order to import cheer into her fading hours. Beer, she declared, was better than hot soup in her belly. When Johnny first came to work with them she catechized him.

'You're a weeny little chap. What's your age?'

Her hands were shiny and lumpy, she was thin, but she had a plump behind.

'I'm ten years,' replied the flustered boy.

'God's my mercy! You ought to be at school, your age. Why don't you go to school?'

'I'm not well,' said Johnny.

'Nobody's well in this world. We're all alike.' The old woman hawked and spat into her snuffy handkerchief. 'What's the matter with you?'

'I don't know,' Johnny Flynn confessed.

'How d'ye know you're not well then?'

'I can feel,' said Johnny.

'What can you feel?'

'In my liver,' the boy whispered. 'Inch and half lower than it ought to be, and we can't alter it. My mother's a widow.'

'So your father's dead?'

'Yes; she lives in the country.'

'And where do you live?'

'With my aunt and my uncle. Down at Hackney. He's an engine-driver.'

'That's grand! D'ye like it?'

The boy reflected. 'I don't know,' he said slowly.

'Well, God's my mercy!' tittered the old woman. 'You must go out in the fresh air all you can.'

In the corner a girl sat machining seams. Mr. Sulky took a hot goose from the fire to the table and pressed trousers under a damp rag that soon rotted

the air with the odour of steaming cloth. This was a necessary evil, for although all the others were engaged in cutting out, preparing, stitching, binding, button-holing, and generally compounding trousers, the art of finishing the garment lay with the presser, the prince of a tailor's workshop – and that was Mr. Sulky. No civilian, from a bookbinder to a bishop, would dream of donning a pair of trousers that had not been pressed. A Hottentot might, or a skipjack – yes, conceivably even a bookbinder might – but certainly not a bishop. Let it have buttons of gold, fabulous fabric, silky seams, and trimmings of rapture, fused in a noble equilibrium of cut, but until it has been baptized with a wet rag and punched with a hot iron it is nothing.

Mr. Sulky (who passed for a misogynist) whistled airily as he bumped and hissed with his iron, and then began to chaff the women.

'Well, ladies!'

Heavy scarlet lips gave him the pout of a sardonic man, but his face was a kind face, very pale and very bare. Not a hair or the sign of it was to be seen on his chin. Or on his arms. At work he cast off his coat, waistcoat and collar, and wore only a striped shirt and a belt round his trousers. He kept on his neat buttoned boots, turned up his stiff cuffs, and his cuff-links tinkled as he jerked his arms.

'What devilry have you all been at since yesterday?'

The ladies glanced at each other, and tittered.

'Nothing, Ernie, so help me God,' cackled Mrs. Grainger. 'Ask Helen.'

'Bah!' The presser clouted his goose down upon some innocent trousers.

'O dear, ladies,' cried the provoking old woman, 'he's got a wink over his eye this morning.'

Mr. Sulky, somewhat baffled, stuttered: 'Born devils! And you're the worst of the lot.'

'No, Ernie, no.' The old woman's glasses twinkled reassuringly at him. 'I had my dues, thank God, years ago.'

'Your dues!'

'Many a time, and I can't deny it,' said the old woman.

'Ah, devils born, I tell you,' groaned the presser.

'And the men! Dear lord!' Mrs. Grainger shot at him. 'You can't even make your own trousers.'

Mr. Sulky made a rude reply, and the women laughed quietly though they pretended not to. It made Johnny laugh, but at the same time he was ashamed to laugh – and he pretended not to. Once, a boy at school had told him a rude joke, and it was such a cunning comical joke that he had had to tell it in a whisper to his father. Father had giggled. 'Don't tell mother,' implored the boy. And father had said: 'Pooh, no. No fear!' But Johnny was sure that he had gone and told mother at once, and he could not bear to think of it.

There was no more joking after Mr. Alabaster came in, for he was the master. Mr. Alabaster had

short bow legs, a pink face, and florid hair that curled dandily. So did his voice, for he lisped. Very cheerful he looked, and was seldom harsh to anyone. At the table opposite Mr. Sulky he stood with a measuring tape around his shoulders, a pair of shears or a piece of pipeclay in his right hand; and having made chalk marks on whatever piece of cloth was before him, he cut trousers out of serge, flannel, duck, vicuna, tweed, any mortal cloth you could think of, all day long. A very clever fellow. A thoughtful man, too. He would never allow Johnny Flynn to stay in the workshop during the dinner hour. Summer or winter, rain or shine, out he had to go.

'You muth get the fresh air into you,' Mr. Alabaster said. 'Itth good for the lining of the stomach, or I shall have the poleeth on me. You can go under the railway arch if it rainth.'

No one but Mr. Sulky had the privilege of staying in the workshop during dinner time: that was the edict, the injunction, the fixed rule. Then how was it that Mrs. Smithers stayed there sometimes? Johnny would like to know. Mr. Alabaster did not know of it, but Johnny knew and the women knew; what was more, although they never enjoyed that favour themselves, they were glad when Helen did. Johnny was glad, too, in a way, because of course her husband was a nasty cruel man who slogged her about, and it was best for her not to go home more often than she had to. Mrs. Grainger used to advise her about Smithers:

'Give him in charge, my gal; turn him out, or sling your hook. He's a dirty foul thing, and the Lord gave him to you for a walking wickedness.'

'How can I do that?' asked Helen. 'I'm married to him, and there's little Hetty.'

'Oh, God's my mercy!' Mrs. Grainger was baffled, but still emphatic. 'Give him in charge and sling your hook. What with the men and their women and the holy marriage bells, you can't tell your head from your elbow. It ought to be made impossible, and then there'd be some sense in Christianity.'

Well, the boy would go and walk in the streets. Unless it rained he avoided the railway arch because someone had done murder there, and someone else had painted a white skeleton on the wall; so he walked about. There was the dreadful den where the Jews brought their fowls to be strangled; knots of gabbling women dangling dead birds or birds that were going to be dead, the pavement dribbling blood, and feathers falling, sticking in the blood. And in the bakehouse next door you could watch a man flinging limp motzas, like pieces of white velvet, into a big oven, and another man drawing them out as stiff as china plates. Soon he opened his packages of food – wedges of bread and slips of meat folded in a sheet of newspaper. Scrupulously he sniffed the meat, and not caring for that smell he dropped the meat into a gutter and chewed the bread with resentment. Yesterday it was pickled

pork, and the day before; it would be pickled pork to-morrow, and the day after, and the day after that. Whatever it was he had it for a week; six days it savoured, and did all that it was not expected to do. His aunt was a wise and busy woman who could not prepare a fresh meal for him every day; it was not to be thought of and it was not necessary. Every Saturday night she bought for his separate and sole consumption a little joint of meat, cooking it specially for him on Sundays; and every week his stomach turned sour on it after a day or two. The image of that evil ort of flesh reposing undiminishably in the larder tormented him even in dreams. It never entered his mind to complain to his aunt, and if it had done so he had little of the spirit of complaint. If he was not exactly a Spartan, he was, you might say, spartanatical. Things happened to you; they were good, or they were bad – and that was the truth about everything.

Now this neighbourhood was full of little Jew boys, and it was the custom of little Christians to submit such heathens to mockery, often to ill-treatment. In the early days there Johnny Flynn had called after some of them, 'Sheeny! Sheeny!' Sweet knowledge, how we live and learn! It was no joke to be the one pure Christian boy in a street full of belligerent bloody-minded Hebrew serpents who pretended to run away when you made a face at them, but who, as soon as you pursued them, turned diabolically upon you and dashed your Christianity

into discomfiture and blood. Perhaps it was these very misfortunes that made Johnny Flynn so fond of evangelical hymns. Whenever he experienced any joy – and that was not seldom – he would lift up his heart and sing to himself that he was

'*Sweeping through the gates of the New Jerusalem,*
Washed in the blood of the Lamb.'

Or if it were sorrow that he felt – and that, too, was not seldom – he would murmur the

'*Sweetest carol ever sung:*
Jesus, blessed Jesus.'

But maybe it was really an emotional gift from his mother. Always on Sunday eve she had taken him to an undenominational chapel run by some hooded sisters and a preacher with gaunt eyes who sometimes preached himself into a fit. At some stage of the service the sisters would come round and interrogate the worshipper.

'Are you saved?'

'Yes, ma'am, thank you,' Mrs. Flynn would reply.

'Praise God. Is your little boy saved?'

'Yes, ma'am,' said mother, with bright hope in her eyes, 'I *think* he is.'

'Praise God, sister.'

But when the lady had passed on Johnny would bend and growl at his mother:

'What d'you tell her that for?'

'Well, you *must* be saved, Johnny, you know you must.'

'I ain't going to be,' he would say wretchedly; 'never, I won't be.'

'Now don't you be a bad boy, Johnny, or you'll go to the fire. Of course you must be saved; whatever next!'

Then, seeing him so cross, she would press his hand fondly and he would love her again, so that when they stood up to sing '*Sweeping through the gates*' he would join in quite happily and admire her sweet voice.

Ah, in such matters he was on the side of his father. Father was an atheist; he had even joined the Skeleton Army – a club of men who went about in masks or black faces, with ribald placards and a brass band, to make war upon the Salvation Army. Yet when his father had died – twelve months ago – and a friend had made a small wooden cross, painted black, to put on his grave, Johnny had painted his name and dates on the cross in white paint with a thin brush that vexed him to madness, for the hair of the brush kept sticking out at the angle of the pressure applied and looked like an L. Moreover, Johnny had decided that his father should have an epitaph; so he cut up a piece of a cardboard box, gave it a border of black ink, composed a verse, and tacked the card to the cross with some little nails.

I am not gone I am only a sleep.
Where Jesus heavenly mansions keep
Grieve not for long nor trouble be
And love each other because of me.
J. F.

He wept while he composed this piece of deathly poetry, and whenever he recalled it afterwards he wept again. His mother, too, liked it so very much that tears came into her eyes. In a few weeks rain had soaked the card on the cross; the sun had bleached it and discoloured the ink so that it could hardly be read. When some of the tacks came out the card curled over and exposed an advertisement on its back of somebody's baking powder.

Long ere day was over the boy regretted his rash disposal of the meat; devastating hunger assailed him and he yearned for any scrap, even a dog's. At such times it was the joy of heaven to him if Mrs. Grainger beckoned at tea-time.

'Johnny, I want you to go and get me a haporth of tea, a haporth of sugar and a farthingsworth of milk. There's threehapence – you can have the farthing for yourself.'

Nice, nice old woman! With his farthing he would buy a few broken biscuits; and he would borrow a pinch of her sugar and dip his biscuits in her milk.

That did not happen every day. At other times it was a desperate joy to stand in front of a grocer's window, to divide the display in half, and to ponder long and exquisitely which half he would take if a choice were given him. Would you have marmalade, potted tongue, cocoa, and condensed milk – things like that – or would you have pineapple, cornbeef and split-peas – candles being no good? Desperate schemes for obtaining any of these, or anything else eatable, simply assaulted his longing, but he had no courage to test them again after he had once stolen a salted gherkin that made him vomit. He would turn away and glare along the pavements and gutters, hoping to find an apple-core or a rotten orange. Once he had the odd chance to pick up a playing-card, which he tore into pieces. Mother had warned him against the sin of cardplaying; she had warned him against everything immoderate and immodest – strong drink, little girls, stealing, smoking, swearing, and such like. Yet whenever Mr. Alabaster or Mr. Sulky sent him out in the evening for a can of beer he could not resist taking a stealthy gulp or two of the liquor. Hunger was awful. In a daze he soaped seams for Mr. Sulky or sewed on buttons for Helen and Mrs. Grainger. If there was nothing else to be done he had to go to the ragroom and sort clippings from that maddening pile. Kneeling down beside his box among the soft rags he would dream over the fine doings he had had on Queen Victoria's Jubilee day. That *was* a day! All the scholars went to school in

the morning to pray, to implore God to confound and frustrate certain nameless nations, to receive a china mug with the Queen's face twice on it, a medal with her face again – in case the mug got broken – and a paper bag containing half a sausage-pie and a great piece of cake. Lord, how grand! He ate them all over again and again. Then you marched out to the park with flags, and the park was full – millions of kids. There were clowns and jokers and sports, and you had your mug filled with tea from a steam-roller. Hundreds of steam-rollers. And then he forgot everything and fell asleep sprawling amongst the rags until he was awakened by angry Mr. Alabaster.

'Hi! hi! Thith won't do, you know. I don't pay you for thleeping, it will bankrupt me. It won't do at all. You and I muth part. God bleth, aren't you well?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, then! God bleth, do you think I am a millionaire with hundredth of pounds. I can't understand you, and it won't do. You and I will part, my man.'

But at the end of the day the kind Mr. Alabaster would sometimes give him a penny to ride part of the way home in a tram. With his penny Johnny hurried off to buy a cake or a pie, and thereafter walked cheerfully home. Often that penny became such a mighty necessity to him that as he knelt alone among the rags in the gloomy room, the pose, the quiet, and the need induced a mood in which he mumbled dozens of prayers.

'O God, make him give me a penny to-night, only a penny; make him give me a penny, please God. Amen.'

As if to impregnate his plea with suitable flavour, he crooned over the hymns he knew. Then again:

'Please God, make him give me a penny. Please this once, like you did before, and I won't ask again. Amen.'

Not often were these prayers answered, and directly their failure became apparent he would descend weakly to the street, his whole body burning with ferocity against so frightful, so callous, so unseeing a god; and he would gasp out horrible blasphemies, until he came to a shop window where he could pause for a long rest, divide up its delicacies, and mystically devour them. In such delight he always forgot his anger against Jehovah.

One morning Helen came to the workroom at a very late hour. Mr. Alabaster regarded her sternly as she came in, until he saw she had a black eye horribly bruised, and knew she had been crying. She whispered a few words to Mr. Alabaster before going to her seat, and he lisped: 'O yeth, yeth. Dear me! Itth dreadful, yeth. Dear, dear me. All right.'

Mr. Sulky did not utter a sound, not one terrible word, and the whole room became silent. After his first and only glance at the disfigured woman, Mr. Sulky pounced upon his task with a fermenting malignity, the wrath of one whose soul had been split by a shock that drained him of charity and compunc-

tion, and his hot iron crashed upon the apparel before him as though it contained the body of a loathed enemy. Windows trembled at each mighty jar, implements on the table spitefully clattered, and paper patterns fluttered off the walls as if casting themselves to perdition. Mr. Alabaster looked across protestingly.

'My word, Ernie! I thay!'

The presser ignored him. Snatching the iron from its stand, he flashed across the room, flung the cooling goose into the heart of the fire, took another in its place, tested it with a spirt of saliva that ticked and slid into limbo, and resumed his murderous attack on the trousers.

'Stheady, Ernie! God bleth, you'll have the theiling down on uth!'

Mr. Alabaster's pipeclay was jolted from the table by the next concussion. Mr. Alabaster was master there, but he was a timid man; Sulky could eat three of him, and Sulky was a pearl amongst pressers; so Mr. Alabaster put on his coat. If Sulky was going mad he could go mad in peace and comfort.

'Muth go up the town this morning. Be back after dinner. Look after everything, Ernie. You know. Don't . . . ah . . . don't break anything, Ernie.'

The ignoring Mr. Sulky signalized his master's departure by a volley of ferocious clouts upon the garment he was handling. Then he stopped. Although the sewing-machine whirred in its corner, the quietness of the women was perceptibly tense.

Helen bent low over her work. Johnny knew that she was still crying, and he could not bear to see this, so he tiptoed from the workshop into the room across the passage and flung himself into the melancholy business of sorting the clippings. Canvas, buckram, silesia, cotton, silk, tweed, serge, flannel and vicuna, all fetched different prices in the rag market and had to be separated into heaps. The main heap was impregnable; it was a job that never could be finished, for the pieces always accumulated faster than the boy could sort them. It was a tide that ebbed lightly and flowed greatly, and the spirit of the boy was drowned in it. Once he had read a fairy tale about a prince in captivity who was given a barn full of canary seed to sort out in a single night or else he was to be turned into a donkey. But the prince had a fairy godmother who set some earwigs on the job, and they finished it while the prince went off to a ball and married a poor girl who was lovely and good and had cured the fairy godmother of toothache. But there were no fairy godmothers in Whitechapel, and earwigs were no use – not with cloth. And Johnny's head behaved strangely nowadays. Sometimes his head would go numb and he would feel as if he were falling out of his body and sinking into the void. Or if he only heard the ping of an omnibus bell in the city, even that gave him a horrible blow in his heart, and his heart would rattle madly. The sound of the bells was so shocking to him that when he went up to the city he always stuffed pieces of wadding in his ears.

And the sight of the room full of rags affected him in much the same way: his head swam, his knees trembled, and his heart rocked.

Suddenly the door was dashed open and Mr. Sulky appeared.

'O,' he said, seeing Johnny there. Then: 'Get out of this!'

The boy slunk out into the dark passage. Helen stood at the door; she held a handkerchief to her eyes.

'Come,' said Mr. Sulky, and Helen followed him into the rag room. They did not fasten the door. Johnny lingered outside; he did not know what else to do, he was a stupid boy. Hearing nothing within the room and being somewhat bewildered, he pushed open the door. Helen and Mr. Sulky were folded tightly in each other's arms, silent.

'Where shall I go?' the boy timidly whispered.

The presser turned his white face towards him and with his great teeth bared he snarled:

'Go away, you idiot!'

Out shot his foot and the door slammed in Johnny's face. The boy felt that his indiscretion had been vulgar. There was something in the surprising embrace of the two people – the figure of the piteous Helen and her tender cherishing by Mr. Sulky – that seemed almost holy. He crept back to the workroom where the women were talking aloud.

'Here, Johnny,' cried Mrs. Grainger. 'Just run out and get me a pennyworth of pills at the post office. My consumption's so bad this morning, it's

murdering me. Ask for them rhubarb pills. I don't suppose they'll do me any good – the only cure for me is a dose of poison; but God Almighty made the medicine, and I might be lucky. A pennyworth of rhubarb pills, Johnny. And tell that man with the crooked nose they're for a lady that's got a delicate stomach. Don't forget that, there's a good boy.'

When he returned from this errand of mercy Helen and Mr. Sulky were back in the workshop again, looking as if nothing particular had occurred. Helen seemed cheerful. Mr. Sulky whistled softly and did not bang his irons about very much.

This was one of the days on which silly Johnny had thrown his dinner away, and as time wore on the old hunger brought him to his old despair. At seven o'clock Mr. Alabaster and Mr. Sulky tossed up to see who should pay for supper, and Mr. Sulky won – he always did. Johnny fetched them a small loaf, some cheese, a tin of lobster, and a can of beer. He tore off as much of the loaf's crust as he dared; if he could only have got at the lobster he would have gone to prison for it. He placed the food on the table.

'Good night, sir. Good night, Mr. Sulky,' then he said, moving slowly towards the door. The two men were laughing and cracking jokes.

'Hi! Here, Johnny, hereth a penny for the tram!'

O my, it was very blissful then! Fatigue and despair left him; down the stairs he went leaping, and fled to a cookshop in Mile End Road. It was some distance away, but it was there you could buy such

marvellous penny cakes, of a size, of a succulence, reeking with sweet fat and crusted with raisins. Never a thought of the Lord, never a thanksgiving prayer. Johnny unwrapped the cake and stood gazing at it, seeking the loveliest corner of entry, when a large boy came to him from an alley near by and accosted him.

'Give us a bite, young 'un.'

'Gives nothing.' Master Flynn was positive to the point of heartlessness.

'I've had nothing to eat all day,' the large boy said mournfully.

Johnny intimated that he was in the same unfortunate case himself.

'Give us half of it, d'ye hear,' the other demanded in truculent tones, 'or I'll have the lot.'

Johnny shook his head and hiked a shoulder. 'No, you won't.'

'Who'd stop me?' growled the bandit.

'Inky,' replied young Flynn. And then, as he lifted the cake to his mouth and prepared to bite a great gap in it, the absolute and everlasting end of the world smote him clump on the ridge of his chin. He heard the rough fellow grunt: 'There's the upper cut for yer'; the cake was snatched from his paralyzed grasp. 'And there's another for civility.' Again the end of the world crashed upon his face from the other side. Johnny felt no pain, not the faintest scruple of a physical twinge, but there was such a frantic roaring in his ears that he had to bend down

with his head in his hands and stare abstractedly at the pavement. Scores of people were passing, but none seemed to have noticed this calamity; and when he looked up the fellow was gone, and the cake was gone. Dazed Johnny, after an interval for recovery, and after imprinting upon his mind the exact spot of the occurrence and the situation of that darksome alley, walked on grinding his teeth and registering a vow. He would train for a whole week on puddings made of blood – and then! Arabs gave their horses cakes made with mutton fat and they would fly over the desert, mad, all day long; but for people it had to be blood – and then you could blind anyone. He'd get some blood, a lot.

The next day was cold, with a frozen mist niggling in the streets, and when Johnny returned from an afternoon journey to the city it was almost dark. As he ascended the stairs he could just discern the little girl Smithers sitting there.

'Hullo, Hetty,' he said; and she said, 'Mind where you're coming!' She was nursing a black kitten.

'Your mother ain't done yet, Hetty, not for hours.'

The child hugged her kitten more closely, making no reply.

'Why don't you go home?' Johnny asked.

The child looked up at him, as if wondering at his foolishness.

'Somebody 'ull kick you,' he went on, 'sitting down. What you sitting there for?'

A voice from the head of the stairs called 'Hoi!'

Johnny looked up. 'It's me,' he said.

Down came Mr. Sulky. 'Is that Hetty?'

The child stood up and the man put an arm around her shoulders. 'Hallo, Hetty. Cold, aren't you? Want some tea?'

Hetty tucked the kitten under her arm and said 'Yes' very softly. So Mr. Sulky put his hand in his pocket and jingled some money. Then he turned to Johnny. 'You want some tea?'

'No, not much,' lied the boy.

'Well, here's sixpence. Take Hetty out to some coffee-shop and give her a good tea, anything she likes, and have some yourself if you want any. Will you do that?'

'Yes,' said the boy.

'There you are, Hetty,' Mr. Sulky said; 'you go along of Johnny. He'll take you. And then come back here with him.' Bending down, Mr. Sulky astonishingly kissed the child.

She and Johnny clattered down the stone stairs together and out into the street.

'You can't bring that kitten,' Johnny pointed out, 'not in a shop.'

'Why?' asked the little girl.

'They won't serve you, not in a shop.'

Dully the child answered: 'Yes, they will.'

'They'll laugh at you,' protested Johnny. 'They'll . . . they'll cut its head off.'

'No, they won't,' Hetty said.

And in point of fact they did not, although the first thing they saw on entering the coffee-house was a man in a white apron sharpening a long thin knife – a very large man. They sat down in a compartment rather like a church pew, and the large man soon came up to them and tapped on their table with his ferocious knife.

'Well?' said he, very affably.

'Two cups of coffee, please, and two dorks, please,' young Flynn timidly ordered.

Soon the large man returned with these things.

'Two coffee, two slices,' he said, and pushed a basin of brown sugar towards them. Johnny thereupon gave him the sixpence, and the man gave him threepence change.

'It's nice in here, ain't it?' said Johnny. And indeed it was; warm and savoury, with the mingled odours of fish and bacon and the sawdust on the floor. Most of the other compartments had men in them, but they took no notice at all of the children or the kitten. Hetty dropped some spoonfuls of coffee into her saucer and stood the kitten on the table. It lapped a few drops and then sat upon its haunches to gaze at the ceiling.

'Going to have some more coffee?' inquired the boy.

Hetty nodded her head and said 'You?'

'Na!' Johnny was contemptuous. 'I don't want any more coffee. What else d'you want?'

'Jam turnover,' replied the child.

The boy made a wry face. 'You don't want that. Nothing in 'em,' he declared. 'If I was you I'd have a lump of Tottenham cake. Have some Tottenham cake?'

Hetty picked the kitten off the table. 'Ernie said I could have what I like.'

Johnny took her empty cup and walked off to the counter, returning with the cup refilled, a jam turnover, and a triangle of cake that had a pink bile-provoking veneer upon it. 'Tottenham,' said Johnny. They lingered on for some time until everything had disappeared, and Johnny had to explain to incredulous Hetty that all the money was gone.

'Where d'you live?' he asked her, and she replied that she lived in Bermondsey, that her father was a bottle-washer.

'I ain't got no father,' said Johnny Flynn dismally.

'He gets drunk every day,' continued Hetty.

'I ain't got no father at all,' repeated the boy, leaning his elbows on the table and looking mournful.

'And slashes mum,' said she.

'What for?' The boy was awed, but curious.

'He keeps on trying to kill us.'

'Yes, but what for?'

'I dunno,' said the little girl. 'Mum says he's gone into bad habits.'

'When my father got drunk,' Johnny Flynn expanded, 'he was grand.'

'And 'e's a noremonger,' Hetty added.

'What's that?'

'I dunno,' Hetty went on, stroking her kitten. 'I wish we'd got another one; I don't like him. More does mum.'

'But you can't have another father! Course you can't, silly,' commented Johnny Flynn.

'Yes, you can; and mum says we will, soon. We'll have to.'

Just then a quarrel arose in a compartment near them, between a man with a peg leg and a man with a patch over one eye. They were sitting opposite each other.

'You're a liar!' bawled the wooden-leg man.

'O! Am I!'

'Yes. There you are. Now you know. I don't care what company I'm in, or what company I ain't in, that's straight from my bloody heart.'

'I'm a liar, am I?' patch-eye shouted.

'Yes, there you are!'

'And there *you* are!' cried the other, and he walloped his accuser over the head with a jar of salt.

The large man in the white apron dropped his knife and rubbed his hands together, yelling: 'Hi! Drop it. Devil and hell, where d'ye think you are – in the bull ring?'

And he hurled himself competently upon the brawlers.

'Drop it, d'ye hear! Or I'll have the guts out of you for my garters. Drop it!'

Both combatants subsided into their benches.

'D'ye see where he hit me?' said the peg-leg man, pointing with his finger to a spot on his head. 'Feel that!'

The fat host plunged his fingers amongst the greying hair. 'Jesus wept!' he murmured. 'There's a lump like St. Paul's Cathedral. I'm surprised at you, Patchy.'

'Called me a liar,' the aggressor explained callously.

'Pooh, that's only his ignorance!'

'Ignorance!' moaned the afflicted one. 'He's broken my brainpan. That's done me a lot of good, ain't it?'

'O, it's just his playful heart, that's all! Now behave yourselves,' the host went on, with emollient raillery, '. . . or! You know what I'll do to you – ha, ha! you know that, don't you? I'm the king of the castle here, and an Englishman's castle's his birthright all the world over. A king can do no wrong.'

'Why not?'

'It's just a law, like everything else,' mine host explained, 'but of course it's kept private.'

'O,' said the one-eyed man resignedly, 'give him another cup of cawfee!'

During this tumult Hetty trembled fearfully, and at last Johnny had to usher her out of the place.

'I don't like these dark streets,' said she, clutching Johnny's hand and tucking the kitten under her arm.

'That's nothing,' Master Flynn assured her. 'I like fighting. Don't you like fighting? I had a scrap

with a bloke last night in the Mile End Road, and I split his head open in six places. Do you know what Peter Jackson does when he trains himself? He's the champion of the world, he is.'

Miss Smithers did not know.

'He drinks blood,' Johnny informed her.

When they approached the workshop they met Hetty's mother standing in the doorway at the foot of the stairs, so Johnny told her of the grand tea they had had. And while he was also telling her about the quarrel Mr. Sulky came tripping down the stairs.

'Hallo!' he cried, greeting them, as if he had just met them for the first time. 'Here we are then. This way, Nell. Good night, Johnny. Come on, Hetty.' And before Johnny could explain how he had spent the whole sixpence Mr. Sulky took Helen's arm and Hetty's hand, and the three of them walked off together. And Johnny heard Hetty exclaiming:

'Mum! Look at the dear little kitten!'

Johnny never saw Helen again. Apparently she had gone away, and she would be happier now. At the end of the week the women had a 'whip round' and collected a small sum of money to buy Mr. Sulky a teapot. He was setting up housekeeping – Mrs. Grainger said. And when she gave him the teapot she said God bless him, and wished him the best of luck.

In a little while Johnny's tribulation came to a happy end. His mother wrote that she could not

bear to be parted from him any longer; he had been away a year; he must come home to her now. His aunt was deeply annoyed at such ingratitude and wanted him to refuse to go home; but Johnny gave his notice in to Mr. Alabaster, who said he was very sorry to part with him, and declared that he 'wath the beth boy he ever had.' When the joyous last day came Mr. Alabaster wished him good-bye and gave him some good advice. Mr. Sulky did the same and presented him with sixpence as well.

'Good-bye, little Johnny,' whispered old Mrs. Grainger – and she gave him two new pennies. Johnny kept them sacredly in a box for many a long day.

ADOLF PLUMFLOWER

ADOLF PLUMFLOWER WAS A PERSON OF NO CASUAL misfortune, he had sprung a fully armed articulate grievance from the calamity of birth, and by the time one of his small birthdays had been celebrated in a new pair of velvet knickerbockers with nickel buttons he had sustained a measure of ailment and mishap that was remarkable not so much for the amount of misfortune or its persistence as for the number of his escapes. He should have been burned to death, drowned, scalded, poisoned or boiled far more frequently than is the common lot of children. Mother had already hung upon his nose a terrifying pair of spectacles; his father had provided a set of irons to straighten his curving shins; his aunt gave him bronchial mixtures and things for him to wear under his shirt. No one ever gave him what he wanted or could rejoice in, and he had little aptitude for helping himself. Is it surprising then that, at the age of twenty-five when we have him upon our hands, he had occasionally meditated upon suicide, as a means of escape from the bane of being something he precisely didn't want to be? Luckily a morbid desire to know what else fate was keeping in her sack for him gave Adolf the courage to procrastinate, and to honour with submissive attention the misfortunes of his life.

At this time he was a dumpy unattractive little man who kept a dog, a terrier named Abel, and

some pigeons, fantails, pouters and tumblers, whose antics moved him blissfully.

'Give me a dose of chloroform, quick please!' was what he gasped one day as he hurried into a druggist's shop. The face of a girl dispenser there was familiar to him; he leaned upon the counter towards her, and with some agitation repeated the request. Frances Dove stared coolly at him over the cornplasters, sponges and the façade of terrible bottles, noting beads of perspiration upon his face. He explained:

'There's a little dog just been run over outside, very badly smashed, do give me something to put him out of it.'

Frances Dove gave him nothing of the kind, but she at once hastened from the shop with Plumflower. Amid a cluster of people standing some yards along the street an elegant lady crouched upon the pavement weeping over a little body in her lap, a crumple of fur and blood.

'It's all right, the policeman's strangled it,' said a man. Plumflower turned to the girl with a sick look in his eyes, a queer faintness assailing him.

'Come to the shop,' said the girl sharply. He followed her and she gave him a tumbler of water.

In the succeeding weeks Adolf developed a passion for a remarkable number of toilet fancies. Soaps uniquely scented, for to be shaved with and for to be washed with; tubes of dentifrice and cosmetics delectable but costly; hair-oil enough to

float a ship – a little ship, mind you – and paregoric enough to sink it. Pills and purges were too indelicate for the occasion, but dog-soap and flea-dispellers were acquired for Abel, while patent medicines, famous from Archangel to the Antipodes, brazened it out upon his bedroom mantelpiece, and were as effective there as they were in Houndsditch or Honolulu. There could be but the one outcome of such delicate pressure, and in the fullness of time Adolf Plumflower walked with Frances Dove.

Miss Dove lived with her widow-mother in a village a mile or two out of the town, and you may figure the unprepossessing little man on his first Sunday afternoon, a bright November one, in the Doves' tiny parlour, the window all geraniums, and the interior all albums and tough arm-chairs, and he lying back in one of the latter listening to Frances playing hymns on an American organ. Alas for him, the occasion was as stiff as his own starched collar. Frances was all right, with her hair not less abundant than bright, eyes not less bright than blue, and her clear shell-like skin. There was a beautiful bosom under her cream-coloured bodice, and her white slim hands, as she stooped once to fasten the lace of her patent-leather shoe, were fine things to see, exquisite to take and kiss. Frances was all right – it was that mother of hers that palled upon him, and kept the sometime oracular Plumflower as dumb as a baluster.

'The hedges are very beautiful now,' said the

angular Mrs. Dove, who sat beside the fire with a certain proprietorial aspect that quelled him, and probed him with small talk that confounded him, and gloomed at him through monstrous spectacles in the dim light until his very soul was burnt in two spots as by a sun-glass.

'They are beautiful, ma'am,' said Mr. Plumflower.

'I have never known the berries so plentiful,' said the lady, preparing to wring the neck of the contrary opinion should it chance to wag its fatal head.

'There's a lot of berries about,' said he.

'Spring was late this year,' the lady explained.

'O, quite late,' Adolf's cordiality was astounding.

'Buckthorn is very plentiful,' continued Mrs. Dove, pursuing her maddening pastime, 'and it's so useful, you know, but the bittersweet is more attractive.'

'Yes . . . ah . . . it is,' said Adolf, although he had no more notion of bittersweet than he had of opium.

'Adolf would like Madigan's tree,' chirped Frances, 'you would like the spindle tree: the one at Madigan's farm, it's just like a pink, pink cloud.'

After that Mrs. Dove talked of fire insurance. Mr. Plumflower countered her with electric tramways, and Miss Dove, on occasion, discoursed cheerfully of poisons.

'Ah,' said the happy lover, 'I must get you to give me a sample.'

'I will, a pint of it, if you like!' laughed the girl.

'What would Mr. Plumflower want poison for?' growled Mrs. Dove.

'Just experiments, ma'am; science, you know.'

'I believe he's a Socialist,' cried the daughter, 'he says such dreadful things.'

It was a happy time. When he left in the darkness after tea Frances accompanied him a little way through the village. Adolf told her that he thought her mother was a nice lady.

'Yes, she's nice,' the girl doubtfully assented.

'O, such a nice lady indeed,' cried he.

'But she's very touchy about me, you know, having a . . . a friend, or bringing anybody home.'

'Stands to reason,' said the oracle. 'A mother's a mother.'

'But she doesn't want me to go anywhere I like, or do anything I like, or bring home anybody I like, and I'm twenty-three, you know, and I'm not a fool.'

Adolf assured her – and was assured – of her absolute perfection.

But Time, that impeccable conjurer, having tossed him a golden ball, was now bent on fooling him. For misfortunate men nothing is so unhappily charged as the lapse of time, and this admirable affair, so sweet to him, suffered the fate of all the enterprises and ambitions and dreams as cared to come to such an unpromising little man. The predication of

hovering mischief was fulfilled in the spring: he knew she had cast her adorable glances upon another fellow who somehow contrived to carry more attraction in the laces of his boots or the buttons of his coat than Adolf could manage with the full splendour of his expensive fancy waistcoat, or his beautiful malacca cane. He had but been, as he could sharply feel it, just a means by which Frances had broken the bonds of her too cherishing mother, and there was now nothing, really nothing, left for him beyond some half-anticipated grace of gratitude.

How sad it is for poor Adolf: his hour, brief and shining, is over, though its flame persists as ineffectually as a lighted street lamp at broad noon. He is most moved when the thoughts come to him that she has no notion at all of how deep his wound has been, that he cannot now in any mortal way show her the depth of his devotion. Unlucky, O, unlucky, he had been emotionally reserved, not emotionally deficient; O how unlucky! He cannot woo her back to him, nothing can turn her now, though she would sorrow if he were harmed or dead, surely? It was comforting to have even this conviction of her pity, and he conceived a fantastic and mournful picture of a revival of her old affection for him from the mere fact of his demise.

So he appeared one afternoon in the druggist's shop, his mind teeming with schemes.

'Hullo, Plummie,' said Frances, who, for some inscrutable reason, declined to let her new attach-

ment diminish the cordiality of her encounters with Adolf, 'what are you after?'

He glanced around the shop and then said quickly:

'Poison.'

'What?'

'Poison . . . just a little . . . you once promised me some . . . you remember . . . 'speriments, you know.'

Frances looked steadily and gravely at him, with the same look she gave him when the dog was killed, and he felt the moment was good.

'Frances, you given me a worse poison already than you promised, you needn't blink at this!'

'What do you want poison for?'

'Love!' said Adolf Plumflower; then he felt very foolish, and Frances giggled.

'How much do you want?'

'I want just enough.'

'Any particular sort?' she asked, looking out through the shop window at the traffic.

'I don't know,' he mused.

'Strychnine is very painful, Adolf, and prussic acid is very nasty.'

He ground his teeth, but she was attractively provoking, detestably alluring.

'Frances, you think it silly, I know, but I shan't do anything foolish; it will be nice to have it by me, it, it will be a . . . a comfort.' He felt shockingly tearful now. 'Give me something, anything!'

She said 'No!' decidedly.

He turned away, one step, two steps, three steps.

'Adolf!'

He stopped, his heart began to leap, the idea was working, by God it was! He went back to the counter. 'What are you doing to-night?' she asked. 'Come and take me to the station, will you?'

He could but just gulp 'Yes, Frances,' like some strained maniac, and hurry out.

In the bright air his elation possessed him. He repeated again and again: 'By God, by God, the one chance! The dear girl, I'll show her what a man's love is made of, something she'll put a great price on. She doesn't know, doesn't know, poor girl. Lovely Frances, lovely Frances, it will be all right, by God it will!'

During the afternoon his fellow clerks occasionally heard him saying over to himself 'By God, by God!' They perceived him to be a little distracted; one even asked him if he had the stomach-ache.

Punctually at seven Adolf walked into High Street. The sun was beginning to set, the air was full of light and pleasant to breathe. The flags that hung above the big drapery shops just moved their colours, and the vanes of the church towers shone so brightly. Adolf was extraordinarily exhilarated. He felt that the High Street was good, that its blowsy flags were scented, and he as triumphant as the cock upon the bright vane. Just as he reached the druggist's shop Frances appeared – heaven and

earth, but yes! – with the other man. She just pranced up to Plumflower – there is no other word for it – and apologized sweetly for having to disappoint him. She turned away, but came back whispering:

'O, I almost forgot what I promised; now be very careful with it, there's enough to kill six men.'

Putting into his hands a small phial she was gone from him. The heart in his breast behaved as a cinder may behave when plunged into a breeze or flung into water. It was awful. And if the physical torture was indescribable what can be said of his emotional agonies? He looked stupidly at the bottle.

It was a small blue thing; it had no label, but was so sinister-looking. Poison – it was what he had asked for, poison, deadly poison; he had asked for it, and she had given it him. It was very good of her, very good, in a sense, if you could look at it in that way, but it was a steep thing to do, atrociously callous; a girl who could so casually effect such a thing must be a little bit of a horror. Engrossed with his unhappy thoughts, and carrying the bottle in his hand, he walked the crowded pavements, chattering under his breath, and surprising people with his violent contacts and gaily profuse apologies. Did she want him dead? Why should anyone, let alone a woman whom you would die for, take you so monstrously at your word? He'd die for her right enough, but did she really think he was going to kill himself for a . . . for an experiment? Didn't he

matter any more than that to her? O, Frances, Frances . . .! He pulled himself together, he even lifted his hat and bowed gravely to a lamp-post that impeded him, then put the poison in his pocket and went home.

In the succeeding days Adolf Plumflower behaved very badly, that is to say he escaped by no fine human distinction the common course such a calamity may take. He became hopeless and careless, drank himself into ill health and gambled to distract the torture of his loss. The painful impression that Miss Dove's bestowal of the poison had made upon him was no passing one; the more his sometimes maudlin mind dwelt upon the circumstance the more detestable did it appear. She as good as wanted him to kill himself! She wanted him out of the way! What for? What for? He's *asked* her for the stuff, of course, he knew he'd asked her, but any fool would know you were just 'anking. If he took that stuff she'd be good as murdering him. And he liked her too, better than he liked his own miserable life, but that didn't excuse her, as far as he could see!

One August night he went home tipsy. In the kitchen where his supper was set the dog Abel lay upon a chair. It had been unwell for days, and seemed to be growing as morose as his master. They took no notice of one another, and Adolf soon retired. In his bedroom he busied himself at his trunk until he found what he searched for. He put

the little phial into the pocket of his coat, and murmuring 'To-morrow, to-morrow' he undressed and tumbled into bed.

In the morning he did not go to his work – he'd done with that kind of truck – but carrying the sick dog in his arms he went to a horse-doctor and asked for the dog to be destroyed.

'Righto!' said the horse-doctor, and he took the fee and tied Abel to a wall in his yard. Adolf gave Abel a farewell pat when he was tied to the wall. The dog lifted his feet uneasily and whimpered, and Adolf walked away full of malignity and sorrow, striving vainly to escape the frightful dumb plea of the dog's parting gaze. But he had sterner work before him, and he marched and marched out of the town to find the place in which to do his last work, and in the afternoon – bright and beautiful the day was too – many miles from his town he came to a sweet place of woods and fields where there was carting of hay.

He looked from a small hill upon a vale below him. The river circumambled in vivid loops as if twisted by some august finger. There were a few pastoral huts and insignificant cotes, but the trees composed themselves at the edge of the new-shaven fields in a setting fair and fine as in a province of Arcady. Tough knaps of willow ranked along the streams. The lately-pollarded ones squatted along the banks in knots and angles like giant fungi; those trimmed a year ago had little delicate fans, while

those whose shoulders had for some years escaped the indignity of the axe had all the solid weft of timber. At each end of the vale broad elm and husky poplar made rich combs of sound and shade. The river rolled like soft glass; there were coloured carts beside the mounting stack, red, blue and yellow, and a cow with amiable nod at fly on shoulder. Many were the sounds to be heard; the whole firmament was full of larks, and sylvan air, the neigh of a horse, a blackbird over the road.

It was to such a place Adolf Plumflower was come, and sitting down upon the grass at the lonely roadside he made ready to receive the initiation he desired. A foolish little man: he was come here to die, in the conviction that the next best thing to dying was to die in a good place! And yet he would be a fantastical person indeed who hadn't *some* fantastical notion about the circumstances of his dying. He put his hand upon the thing he carried in his pocket and looked again at the little dark bottle. 'This is a good place,' he whispered, staring again at the beauty of the vale. Taking out his pocket knife he cut the pleated capsule from the cork. He wanted to indulge himself in a last dream of the things he would have liked for himself and for Frances Dove, but he crushed that timorous softness. Steady for a few moments. He did not think at all; the tiny sounds of his mind clicked like a cooling ember. Then he exclaimed suddenly, 'Now, Frances, what about it!' and drew out the cork. Believe me, when

he lifted the bottle to his lips he discovered it to be empty, though there was a strange fume in it which he thought was the smell of ether.

'What a maniac I am,' he cried, 'the stuff's evaporated. God a'mighty, what a thing!' And he cursed by right and by left, by high and by low, cursed himself and Frances, cursed the world, the flesh, and the black devil that dogged him. The reaction from the pitch of morbid ecstasy to which he had primed himself was not less cruel because of his unanticipated preservation. Then he got up, and casting not another look at the beauty which was so good to die upon he traipsed the long journey home.

There, a new defeat awaited him. The absence of his dog touched upon his stretched nerves. He could not speak of it, and meat and drink were baleful things to contemplate. He went to his bedroom. The place smelled queerly, it was so hot. He wondered if it were possible yet to save his little Abel; he imagined all sorts of ways of unlooked-for reprieves, as: supposing the vet had been suddenly taken ill, or run over, or had forgotten, or supposing Abel had been too much of a handful when it came to the pinch – he'd been a fighting devil. But Plumflower sat there and lifted not a leg. And yet it was truly this bereavement that agitated him now, not his own mountebank trifling with death, not the loss of the loved Frances, but this pitiless extinction of his little old friend, that betrayed him so shamelessly to all the assaults of grief.

'Poor little dog! a little blessed dog!' he murmured. He could only control his emotion by conversing with himself about the happy history of Abel, his acquisition for a few shillings, the puppyhood – a revel of marvellous sagacity – the exercising, the ratting, the encounters with irate dogless people who disliked in particular the antics that were so triumphantly Abel's. He had trained him, taught him things, thrown sticks into ponds and balls into fields for him, and roved adventurously with him – for rats, hens and sheep were common quarry for Abel. He had sworn at him, beaten him, bought an annual license for him, fed him, bedded him, and in return Abel had given him his affection and a proprietorial sense, which is a sense of great gravity and not a little importance.

'My friend he was, my real friend, my little comrade.' And remembering that last inquiring whimper of the dog he flung himself wretchedly upon the bed, moved to devastating tears.

The next day was Sunday, and in the morning he walked the few neat miles to the village and he came upon Frances at the one right moment: what moment so right as when she was leaving the country church, bowing soberly to the curious old churchwarden who stood in frock-coat, light trousers, and straw hat in hand! How radiant she looked in the bright little place! Behind her were queerly-clad old snuff-taking people, and young ones all smiles and sweetness with scent upon their linen.

Walking beside her he broached at once his topic.

'Frances, you did me a favour once, a great favour, Frances,' – he loved saying over her name – 'and I want you to do it for me once more, Frances, if you will.'

She looked at him with amused curiosity. 'What is it?'

'Fill that again,' he said, offering her the blue phial. She stared at it, stole a glance at him, reddened, and then took the phial.

'Oh, I'm so sorry, Adolf – I hope you didn't mind – it was too mean of me, really – it was quite, quite spiteful.'

'It's all right, Frances, it really is,' he said humbly, trembling beside her loveliness.

'Too, too bad,' she declared, 'you must forgive me – it was just, just thoughtlessness, Adolf,' and she tossed the phial over a hedge.

Quite gravely as they went along she explained that the 'bottle of poison' was just a joke – that it contained nothing at all.

'O, a joke!' said he weakly.

They had reached her garden gate and stood there awkwardly, she on the inside, he without.

'It was very stupid. I hope you won't think too badly of me for it, Adolf. I don't want you to think badly of me at all. You see when I got it ready I didn't know that . . . that I'd be disappointing you that night, you see what I mean – I haven't seen you since to explain. And there was certainly no

poison in the bottle. Why,' she cried, noticing his look of unbelief, 'you don't think that of me, surely!'

'Don't I!' snarled Adolf, in a scandalizing outburst of rage. 'That bottle was poison, it stinks of it now, and you know it!'

Without replying the girl mustered all her dignity and turned away; she opened the cottage door, passed in, and shut it very softly, leaving him still fulminating by the garden gate.

And there let us leave him too, with his destiny still before him, and he looking like a fool.

AT TEN O'CLOCK ONE SUMMER NIGHT FATHER Corkery was in his study devouring a fine large governmental report on Population when his housekeeper tapped and told him that a gentleman was wanting to see him, and very anxious. Father Corkery was a good citizen of the world, a little plump now, a little bald now, a little lazy now, for at sixty you become more impressionable to the blandishments of Time, but he was also a good priest, so he received the gentleman at once, a rich young gentleman, and his name it was Robert Moriarty. It is your business to understand now that this Mr. Moriarty was not only an Irishman, he was an enthusiastic Irishman, his servants were Irish, and he had just now sought out Father Corkery because he was an Irish Priest. Mr. Moriarty was married to an agreeable English lady, a creature of beauty! and both she and her husband were newly come to the borough of Clapham where Father Corkery was in holy orders. By the grace of God (and the connivance of Mr. Moriarty) this lady was even now being brought to bed of a child, so would his reverence come along at once to baptize the child as soon as it should be born. 'Will a duck swim!' says Father Corkery.

Off they went together to a new nice house in the borough of Clapham, where they were let in by a pretty Irish servant, and her name it was Mary

O'Sullivan. Her master inquired: had anything come along while he was away? 'No, Mr. Bob,' says she, 'not a finger of it yet.' So young Mr. Moriarty – a very nice affable fellow, a bit distracted, but who wouldn't be at such times – he bowed his reverence into a nice room and sat him in an arm-chair. He took his black bag away from him and put it under a sofa, but then he picked it up out of that again and set it on the piano. The room was used as a dining-room, or it was used as a drawing-room, but now it had the air of having temporarily suppressed its customary spirits. It smelled faintly of tomato sauce, and was filled with dark heavy orderly furniture, a sideboard with a canopy reaching the ceiling, arm-chairs of leather, a grandfather clock as big as a coffin, and a long rectangular table covered with a cloth of patterned rose and brown. The only frivolous objects in the room were the electric lights and a white elephant of china which stood on the mantelpiece where a clock ought to have been.

Father Corkery and Mr. Moriarty then conversed gently with each other as Mr. Moriarty told the story of his marriage. And this was the way of that. A year ago he had been married – to the finest woman in Ireland. He had been born and bred a good Catholic, but he had been overpowered with love for a lady who was only a Protestant. It was a little bit of an obstacle, that difference of religion, but 'Jewel – says he – my heart's in your pocket.' There could be no other obstacle, both of them being young and

ripe for marriage; their incomes were agreeable and their relations obliging. 'I, Robert, take thee, Millicent, to my wedded wife.' And it was agreed there and then that any boys born of their marriage were to become good little Catholics (or they should), and any girls might become little Protestants, and so here they were now waiting for the first child to be born. The doctor was upstairs, the nurse was there, the priest was here. . . .

'So if it's a girl,' said Father Corkery, 'my time is wasted and I'll not be wanted?'

Mr. Moriarty walked over the room, took the priest's black bag off the piano and put it on the whatnot.

'I was going to tell you about that, Father,' he began. He was deeply obliged to his reverence for coming; he had dearly wanted an Irish priest, for as his reverence knew there were only two sorts of people in the world – the Irish, and those others. 'I was going to tell you about that,' repeated Mr. Moriarty, when the door was knocked and Mary O'Sullivan came ushering in a young curate and said: 'Mr. Caspin, Mr. Bob.'

'Hey, hey, come along,' said Mr. Moriarty. The curate, who had the complexion of a fair girl and the mouth of an old man, went up to Father Corkery very close, said 'Good evening,' and shook him violently by the hand. And then, as he took off a light overcoat, revealing himself dressed in a cassock like Father Corkery, he remarked again that it was a

pleasant evening. Like his reverend brother he, too, had brought a little black bag with him, and in this they both resembled the doctor, except that he was supervising the child's entry into this world while they were already concerning themselves about its entry into the next. Mr. Moriarty took Mr. Caspin's bag and went to put it on the whatnot, until he noticed another bag there, and so he bent down and shoved it under a chair.

'No, not yet,' said Mr. Moriarty to the curate, 'but almost any moment now. Will you seat yourself, sir . . . Father Corkery, this is the reverend Caspin against it's a girl – you mind what I told you. And Mr. Caspin, this is Father Corkery against it's a boy – you mind what I told you earlier on? Excuse me now, reverend gentlemen.'

Pressing a handkerchief to his brow the young man left the two clerics sitting opposite each other before the empty fireplace. Almost immediately Mr. Moriarty rushed in again, opened a cupboard and placed on the table a decanter of port and two glasses.

'Help yourselves, gentlemen, please,' said he, and rushed away again.

'I never touch it,' the curate said.

Father Corkery was pouring out a good glass.

'Forgive me, gentlemen!' cried Mr. Moriarty rushing in once more in great agitation. 'Cigars!' From the same cupboard he brought a box of cigars.

'I never touch them,' the curate said. Father

Corkery said he would use his pipe, and he began to fill his pipe as Mr. Moriarty went away again.

'I suspect,' then said the one to the other, 'that we have a long wait before us.'

'Is the poor lady in difficulties?' inquired Mr. Caspin.

Father Corkery nodded into his tobacco pouch and replied: 'Oh, so-so. A trying day, ye know, is the day of birth, and for awhile the heart pines for oblivion. But in a very short time she will discover, what every mother discovers early or late, that she has been divinely chosen to give birth to one of the world's prodigies.'

To the Reverend Ferdinand Caspin this homely and familiar notion sounded strange; perhaps it was because he thought Father Corkery used the word 'protégées,' a word that at such a time, on such an occasion, had certain unnamable sectarian connotations. Pressing the tips of his fingers together in the immemorial symbol of curacy he leaned forward:

'Tell me, sir; do you approve of these family arrangements? Do you think it right for a child's religion to be decided by the mere accident of its sex?'

Father Corkery puffed his pipe in the immemorial grandeur of reflection. Then he said:

'For us to approve or not to approve makes devil a bit of difference; it's like putting a lock on a cardboard door. On the other hand, sex is no accident at all; it comes, I suppose, by the grace of God. All the

important things of life are decided by sex, and maybe it's as good a guide as any other.'

'Oh come, I say,' Mr. Caspin almost gasped, 'really now!'

'Well,' laughed his reverence, 'I admit I have sometimes thought it would not be a bad thing if all men were Christians, and all women heathens. Indeed, I fancy Nature intended something of the kind and that we have blundered.'

'By Jove,' exclaimed the curate, 'do you know, sir – have you read the ninth volume of Thatchbason's *Commentaries*?'

Well, now, Father Corkery had never even heard of Thatchbason.

'Upon the Epistles!' the curate insisted. 'By Jove, really; he has something absolutely new to say about S. Augustine, as well as S. Paul. He propounds, expounds and defends a thoroughly new position, and a very brilliant position.'

'Something new? Ay?'

'Entirely. And, of course, sir, one is forced to recognize that the female is definitely inferior in moral stability – not to be trusted.'

'Oh, I like a woman to be reasonably unreliable,' said Father Corkery, replenishing his glass and pushing the decanter towards Caspin, who however reminded him that he never touched it.

'Oh,' said Father Corkery. 'I was thinking it was tobacco you never touched.'

'Tobacco, too,' confessed the curate, blushing.

'Ah, you don't touch tobacco! Humph. Yes,' continued Father Corkery, 'that is rather my own feeling about women. I was in Venice once – were you ever in Venice?'

Mr. Caspin nodded enthusiastically. 'Oh, a fascinating place! I shall never forget . . .'

'Have you a match?' interrupted Father Corkery.

Mr. Caspin handed a box across to his confrère and repeated: 'I shall never forget . . .' when Father Corkery again slid the decanter towards him and ejaculated 'Port!'

'No, no, thank you,' Mr. Caspin replied, and was then silent.

After a few moments Father Corkery asked him *what* it was he would never forget.

'Oh, I only wanted to say,' the curate said, 'that I shall never forget the oleanders on the Lido, and the charming little lizards flashing about under the dried seaweed.'

'Oh, I never saw them. When I was there,' Father Corkery proceeded, 'I once went into a great beautiful church, very quiet and lonely. As I went in at the door I heard voices singing, but sounding far away, as if in some chamber, muffled, but extraordinarily beautiful. I stood rapt, and the saintly sound brought tears to my eyes. When I looked about I could not discover where the singing came from. Suddenly the door of the sacristy opened, and then it shut. For a moment I caught a full wave of that rich singing. Then I saw a young girl who had

come out of that doorway, and she walked across to the high altar and fetched an armful of candlesticks. I could still hear the music, faintly, but the girl had got on those loose slippers the Italian women wear, and the flapping of her heels made a very sharp clatter. When she reached the door again she could not open it because her arms were full of the candlesticks, so she kicked on it, crying angrily for it to be opened. I was quite near her so I went and pulled open the door, and then the song burst on me in great fullness. I could see a dozen women inside, old and young, sitting at a long bench cleaning the holy plate. But what smote me, like a cudgel on a drunken head, was the thing they were all singing, with the gusto of a happy choir in beautiful unison. Do you know what it was? I could hear it clearly, and I had heard it before. It was a song of the last conceivable bawdiness! Too wicked for anything.'

Ferdinand Caspin sighed 'Good heavens! Dear me!'

'And yet,' Father Corkery went on, lolling easily in his chair, 'I never think of Venice but I recall the sweet emotion that their fine singing gave me. Oh, they were happy innocent women. And I can see that young girl now, kicking the door with her arms full of candlesticks, and calling harshly "Open!" '

Father Corkery glanced across at the other, who was mute, and then he gurgled with laughter.

'Is that a box of dominoes I see over on the sideboard? If it is I will play you a game.'

Mr. Caspin thought it was not a box of dominoes. And in any case he did not play dominoes.

'I thought we might be here a long time,' said his reverence.

After Father Corkery had taken another swig at the wine Mr. Caspin said:

'I suppose you really approve this arrangement of the Moriartys about their children?'

Father Corkery took his pipe from his mouth: 'I am rather old now to approve things. At my time of life it is much easier to condemn anything, only condemnation so often upsets the kidneys, ye know.'

'Indeed, sir,' said the other. 'I thought age brought a . . . a . . . a more mellow wisdom.'

'It may bring wisdom,' Father Corkery agreed, 'but wisdom isn't mellow; what is mellow is one's indifference. Wisdom must be critical, or what is the use of having it at all? On the other hand, we often fall into the error of believing that criticism itself is wisdom when it may only be bad temper. It is impossible to exercise wisdom in regard to women, for instance, and to criticize them is merely bad taste. Woman is most prone to superstition – so she worships man. She is a great gambler – so she bears his children. It's a pity you don't play dominoes. What do you think; will it be a boy or a girl to-night?'

Mr. Caspin intimated that he could not tell, but they would be bound to know before very much longer.

'I bet you,' Father Corkery said, 'that it's a girl.'

'No, no,' the other shook his head. 'I never gamble.'

'Not! Why not?'

'To me,' said Mr. Caspin, but he made it plain that his present objection was quite impersonal, 'to me gambling is superstition, dissatisfaction, greed, and idolatry.'

'Well,' said Father Corkery, 'we are already dissatisfied and greedy and superstitious, all of us, women more so than men. . . .'

'Exactly,' interjected the curate.

'And that,' his reverence continued, 'may be because they have more to fear – as observed by your Mr. Thatchbason. But now, give a guess: d'ye *think* it will be a boy, or d'ye *think* it will be a girl?'

Mr. Caspin was disinclined to prophesy, but he had an intuition. 'My intuitions,' he declared, 'very seldom fail me.'

'Ha, ha!' Father Corkery rallied him. 'Some people can't resist 'em; it's like cards and horse racing.'

'Well, if you insist,' said the curate, 'my intuition is that the child will be a boy.'

'Is that so?' murmured Father Corkery. 'Now I will tell you my intuition. To-day is the seventh day of the seventh month, and as I walked here with Mr. Moriarty we passed very few people; all told there were seven – and all of them were women. Now what d'ye think of that for a female tip!'

Mr. Caspin was bound to laugh at him. 'I think,'

he replied, looking at the clock, 'it is very likely that this child will be born on the eighth day. Now I will tell you something. After Mr. Moriarty called on me this evening about this matter I went to my study. In my brief absence somebody had been into my room and tidied up, for on the mantelpiece my own photograph stood confronting me – upside down!'

'Well,' temporized the other, 'what d'ye make of that?'

'Surely,' smiled the curate, 'that I am losing my time in this case, that the child will be a little boy.'

'That's a grave omen,' said Father Corkery with a twinkle. 'It probably will be little, but I bet you . . .' Pausing he raked in his pocket and inspected some coins he found there. . . . 'I bet you a solid two shillings that it's a female child.'

'No, certainly not,' Mr. Caspin replied, a little wanly.

'As you will,' retorted the other.

For some time both were silent, Father Corkery puffing imperturbably, Mr. Caspin clasping his knees with folded hands and gazing into anything but the present and at anything but the priest. The house grew so oppressive in its quiet that when the clock struck eleven the air boomed and oozed with its reverberations; they poured through door and ceiling, and burst upon the roof to shock the dreaming chimneys.

'I was interested in a case recently of a sailor,' then began Mr. Caspin, 'who fell off the rigging in the

Bahamas. He was on a ship in the Bahamas I think it was, but I'm not sure at the moment where it was – humph!'

Father Corkery chanted: *Where the remote Bermudas ride.*

'No, it *was* the Bahamas,' continued Mr. Caspin, 'and broke his leg so badly that it had to be amputated and he had to be discharged. He came home and had to be an attendant in a man's public lavatory, one of those underground places, in the parish of a friend of mine, a man I know very well. The sailor's wife had disappeared; I don't know anything about that matter, but no one knew where or why she had gone, so the sailor had to lodge with his married daughter. Every day at one o'clock that young woman, a very respectable creature, had to take her father's dinner to him at that place. She had to stand at the top of the steps and call out "Father!" until he came up to her. Awful, you know. My friend was vicar of the parish, and such a thing was most distasteful to him, as you can understand. Every day this young married woman was subject to all the ribald remarks of any men coming or going in such a place. So my friend had to take steps, and he tried to put a stop to it one way and another, and at first he couldn't, though at last he succeeded. He arranged for one of his choir boys who lived in the same street to take the man's dinner every day. But the extraordinary thing was that the young woman was very angry and would never enter my friend's

church again! Very touchy, these people,' concluded Mr. Caspin.

'Asperity has many friends,' Father Corkery conceded that it was a picturesque case. 'What did the sailor do about that?'

'O,' Mr. Caspin was confused, but he gloomily continued, 'he was a bad lot after all. Some quite unmentionable traffic went on between them, I never knew what, something indelicate, and it was found out.'

'Between whom?' asked Father Corkery.

'The sailor and the choir boy,' returned the other. 'Of course the man was discharged and the boy was sent to a home. Detestable! Why are men so weak? Tell me,' he cried, 'the past was heroic, why is our own age so vulgar?'

Father Corkery brushed his hand over his benignant baldness. 'Ah, my friend, we are superstitious and dissatisfied and greedy. We are endowed, you know, with far more prejudice than judgment. Man enjoys his sinful manhood until he comes to a conviction of sin. Then he reforms and enjoys his reformation until he comes to a conviction of foolishness. That's the way of his life, alternations, a sort of purl and plain woven into the figure of him.'

Mr. Caspin murmured that this was painfully true.

'It helps,' Father Corkery added, 'to make a pattern, just as it does in knitting. But what is that?' he asked sharply. 'Listen!'

They listened, and they heard the thin cry of a

new-born babe. Father Corkery put down his pipe and crossed himself. Mr. Caspin jumped up, went to his bag, and wriggled into his surplice while the priest went on whispering a prayer. Then Father Corkery opened his own bag and put on his own surplice.

'This water I have here,' he said, 'is from the river Shannon; a colleague sent me a quart of it a little while ago. I've brought it specially because our friend is an enthusiastic Irishman. To him the Irish are the greatest people in the world.'

'Dear, dear, this racial pride is fantastic,' said Caspin. 'Do you know, the Japanese believe they are actually descended from the gods.'

'There is really nothing fantastic about that,' his reverence answered, 'for every devout Christian necessarily believes the same.'

At that moment young Mr. Moriarty came rushing in with a very happy look on him.

'It is a girl,' he shouted.

The two clerics looked at each other. 'There now!' laughed Father Corkery. 'I should have won my bet! Ah well, the blessing of God on it all, Mr. Moriarty; I congratulate you from the bottom of my soul. From the bottom of my soul,' he repeated, raising his arms and struggling to get out of his surplice. 'And may the wee thing grow up as beautiful as Helen, as wise at Pallas, as chaste as, as . . . who was that other one, Caspin? Ah never mind! And is your wife doing well?'

'Splendid, Father, the cream of creation,' cried

Mr. Moriarty with gleeful pride. Splendid! But don't be so hasty now, your reverence. It's what I have to tell you, I have to tell something to both of you and I don't know how to tell it to either of you. But it's about Milly – that's herself – she's renagged, at the last moment, of her own will. Yes, Father, will you keep your surplice on? There was the babe in the basket by her side, and she looking at it like a pot of gold, and I'm telling her you both were ready for the baptizing. I'd forgotten about all that – says she. But you remember the arrangement, Milly – says I – the boys for me, the girls for you! Sure I'd forgotten entirely – says she – and now it's a girl after all. Jewel – I says – I've the Protestant man downstairs. No – says she – I was never cracked about religion, but 'twould be a sin for a child to be different from her father and her brothers. Then it's Catholic, you mean – says I. Catholic it is – says she.'

Mr. Moriarty could not conceal, even from Mr. Caspin, his glee at the way things turned out, but he said to him:

'A hundred thousand pardons for disturbing you, sir, and troubling you for nothing at all. It's the women, sir, are the queer creatures.'

Mr. Caspin put his clothes off and into the bag, and begged him not to mention it. In a few moments he bade them both good night.

'Mr. Moriarty,' Father Corkery said, 'God has blessed you with a very fine wife.'

'True for you,' the happy husband beamed, 'and you don't even know her like I do.'

'God has blessed you,' repeated his reverence, 'with the finest wife in the world.'

'True it is, Father; but you can't tell what they'd be wanting from one hour to another. The devil himself, saving your presence, don't know where he is with the creatures.'

'No,' asserted Father Corkery as they went upstairs together. 'God alone knows.'

FAITHLESS PHŒBE

THE POSTMAN, JOHN BALLOON, HAD NEVER ONCE gone mad; he was fifty years old, and although it seemed to his reflectively querulous mind that not one of those years had been without its scheme of trouble, certainly each had been free from madness. Look at him now . . . he was all right, wasn't he? As far as that went, anyhow? He was radically born, that is to say the political ideas of his paternal parent were republican, violently so – the things John himself had said about Queen Victoria would shock you even now if I suffered him to repeat them; but this I will never do. He had a nasal voice, like a rudimentary bagpipe, and in the early stages of his growth he had developed no fewer than three sets of natural teeth. That was a little singular, unnerving even, especially as he was born, or bred to, a habit of gruffness towards people who did not divine – and it was nearly everybody – that a kind heart was beating somewhere beneath the pocket of his infallible watch. When he was thirty he recovered – a little unnaturally, people thought – from incurable consumption. Throughout his life he had been fond of more than the one woman which marriage, if not custom, allots to a man. He married a girl named Phœbe who became almost afraid of him, thinking him mad. Even before their marriage Phœbe was harassed by doubts of his sanity; he *was* a little queer, she fancied, and some day he *might* go mad.

Afterwards there were times when she felt that like a lot at auction he was just going . . . going . . . but he had never indisputably gone, though there had been occasions when her sense of certitude left no further margin for mere conjecture. Nothing succeeds like suspicion, yet he was sane, sane enough; the structure of his mind was magnificent, but it was steeped in Tolstoyan notions, ideas which he had no capacity for digesting, and their effect in his case was like that of a defaulting pill whose anguished quest had somewhat violently miscarried. Phœbe took him; she was a robust girl and she had taken him, abrupt little man with poor physique, for better or for worse, but even in the taking of him she saw the shadow of that cloud of madness.

'We no call to go havin' any parsons,' declared he when they decided to wed. 'I hate 'em, they're no good of in this world.' Nothing so complicated the meaning of the world for John Balloon as the face of a clergyman. 'If you wants me you can have me, and I'll have you, but never a foot do I set in airy a church.'

'Well,' commented Phœbe, 'we must *be* married!'

'Very well, then, we can go to registry office.'

Phœbe had consented with many misgivings, but to her shame she *had* consented, before she discovered that the registrar's office was a little compartment inside the workhouse. To be brought up in a workhouse, or to die in one, was a misfortune that might happen to many a good person, but to be

married in one was an omen full of evil. But it was too late to draw back, and she had gone through the horrid ceremony with shame and tears; had he known anything of his future he too might have 'drowned an eye unused to flow.'

The caprices of her lover had been magnified by such an opportunity. He would not hire a carriage for her, he drove himself alone to the workhouse in a little pony cart he had borrowed. 'Here, nipper,' he had cried to a youngster standing nigh, 'just hold my horse for a minute and I'll give you twopence.' Clad in his ordinary clothes, the only concession to the frivolous occasion was a clean collar that tilted up the shrivelled pallid little face upon which a skimpy beard throughout his life maintained a chequered unthriving existence. A bowler hat crowned him with ridicule, but his queer gait snatched him back some airs of dignity. He walked into the workhouse where Phœbe and her friends awaited him in the registrar's room. Half an hour passed before the registrar was ready to call the couple before him. John had strutted about the office fuming. 'Look here,' he exclaimed in his abrupt snappy way, 'have I got to sign anything?'

'O yes,' replied the registrar, a man of very gentle deliberate speech, with beautiful white hair and whiskers, 'I have to read this document over to you both, and then you have both to sign it.'

John seized a quill from the table: 'Where do I sign?'

The registrar indicated the place; John snatched the paper from him, signed it quickly, and casting the pen back upon the table turned away and put on his hat.

'But I have to read it over to you,' cried the gentle registrar.

'Can't help it,' retorted Johnny sternly, 'no more time, there's a chap outside running me up a score for minding my horse.'

'O well, well,' said the old man, smiling at Phœbe, 'you'll want a copy of this. It will be six and sixpence.'

'Copy!' shouted Johnny from the top of the steps. 'What do I want a copy for? No, I don't want no copy!' He went off out of the gateway, gave two pennies to the patient child, and sat down in the trap to await his bride. By dint of borrowing one and sixpence from her brother and ninepence from a friend Phœbe acquired a copy of the certificate, though she did not reveal the transaction to her little man.

They went home to a small semi-detached cottage and lived there for a very long time with very little happiness, but bringing up the three children born to them, until the eldest boy, fifteen years old, had gone to work at a haberdasher's store. Phœbe neglected her home. She had not been a very successful housewife, nor had her husband ever been the loving mate that her romantic imagination had sometimes fondly adumbrated. His stern disciplinary characteristics were a severe trial to her easy-going

nature; her children were growing up, were less of a tie; her doubts of their father's sanity, even of his fidelity, became articles of faith in her, and she sought distracting but dubious consolations in some hole-and-corner quarters of the town.

For his part John Balloon did not think it was love that makes the world go round . . . never had . . . it was a delusion . . . it was only your head went round. It was money made the world spin, money. The chap with only sixpence between him and damnation had the most effective barrier in the world if he only knew how to use it. Money cunningly used . . . at the right moment . . . at the right moment, ah, that was it! That right moment always found him as unready as the foolish virgins, and he was never more unready than on the day when Mrs. Minkle spoke to him about their cottages. It is strange how the widow woman who has to balance a mite of income against the incommutable advantages of a long lean family has often the derisive asset of a queer name. It is surely not the least of her vexations. What could any woman, let alone a poor widow, do with the Christian appellation of Aminta conjoined to Minkle?

Mrs. Minkle lived in the adjoining cottage, and knocked a sort of living out of odds and ends of work. Five shillings and threepence a week she paid for rent; the postman paid five shillings and ninepence, but for the odd sixpence he gained the use of a large shed at the side of the house.

'Mr. Balloon, 'ave you 'eard? Our cottages is going to be sold! Lord, they're sure to put the rent up on us now; pity you couldn't buy 'em?'

'But, God!' he exclaimed, 'I ain't got a ha'penny to my name.'

At night he spoke of the matter to his wife as they lay abed.

'Dear, dear,' said Phœbe rather drowsily, 'what *shall* we do?'

'I dunno; I'd like to buy 'em,' he said. His wife sniffed, a little contemptuously, as she habitually did about his wild-cat proposals.

'Well, I *might* buy 'em,' he insisted, a little truculently.

'You mad!' said the good lady. 'Got no money.'

John said no more, and Phœbe began to sleep. During the next few days he sounded most of his likely acquaintances, but the sum he required was as far beyond them as the harps of Tara. Few would have declined to help him had it been in their power, for John Balloon, with all his vagaries was known for a man of sterling integrity. He was of that solid cast of mind that is occasionally speculative by instinct, never by habit, and yet is most speculative when least able to endow its chosen faith. He was like the penniless loiterer in the casino who, with tragic chagrin, pursues figmentally the fortunes of a colour to incredible success, what time he has not a groat in his pocket to buy him even a consolatory bun.

At last he spoke of the matter to the grocer opposite – a quaker named Tobias Woodberry.

'I see, I see,' said Tobias, peering over his spectacles; 'it is most difficult for you. Have you tried Mr. Spikins?' Mr. Spikins was a pork purveyor. John had not appealed to Mr. Spikins; he determined to do so at once, but Spikins proved worse even than his name and occupation.

Upon his round the postman brooded upon his misfortune to such an extent that his deliveries began to miscarry. One can stare at the tinted portrait of a King gummed to an envelope until even one's anti-imperial notions recede and give place to a vacuity as void as last year's almanac. Letters for No. 3 were popped into the box of No. 4, and No. 4 being haunted and empty they may be there to this very day. The rector's copy of the *Hibbert Journal* made a brief unresponsive sojourn with the old lady at the corner of the street who sold brandy balls and starch, and the excise office was troubled with much material intended for the Young Women's Christian Association.

John, lamenting his fortune, soon announced to the quaker that he had given up the idea of the purchase. 'I can't buy 'em, that's certain.'

'No, I know you can't,' retorted the quaker suavely, 'I bought them myself last night.'

That statement, so calmly and casually made, was not merely a blow; in fact it was not a blow at all, it was worse, it was the scalding jeer of derision.

Inarticulate grievances began to storm in the postman's breast and swarm to his stammering lips, but Mr. Woodberry continued evenly, leaning his competent elbows on the counter and pointing a greasy finger at John:

'I paid two hundred and seventy for the two.'

'Good Lord!' groaned the victim, 'that's throwing 'em away – freehold?'

'Yes,' said Mr. Woodberry. 'I will sell them to you for three hundred pounds on loan if you will pay all the fees. You shall pay me 5 per cent interest on the loan, and pay off the capital debt by any instalments you like, as and when you like.'

'Let me have to-night to think it over,' snapped John sternly.

'Certainly,' said the quaker, rising and stretching his arms with a pleased sigh.

Again John Balloon broached the subject to his wife as they lay in bed.

'I think,' he said with a yawn, 'I think I'd like to buy these two cottages.'

'Eh?' said the sleepy Phœbe.

'I think I'll buy the two cottages to-morrow!'

'O, I want to go to sleep,' said Phœbe, and so he said no more. He had made calculations, carefully and minutely. The big laundry company already paid him a shilling a week for the use of his shed, and two local shopkeepers stored their trucks for additional sixpences. He could pay the interest and still have the rent of Mrs. Minkle's house for re-

deeming the capital charge and any contingencies. Next day he accepted Mr. Woodberry's conditions, and thus became an owner of property. At night he once more mentioned the subject to Phœbe.

'I bought the two cottages to-day.'

She lay beside him quite still; she feared to provoke him, she believed that softening of the brain had developed, was at last consummating; he might do something dreadful in his delusions.

To Mrs. Minkle when next he saw her he also spoke.

'I managed to buy these cottages after all, Mrs. Minkle.'

''Ave you really!' exclaimed the widow with every symptom of pleasure.

'Yes; so in future you'll pay the rent to me. I ain't a-going to increase it. You'd sooner go on paying it weekly, I suppose, and if ever it comes a bit hard on yer – say you want to buy the children some boots or such like, I'll forgo the rent for a week, or even two weeks. And I shan't want no rent ever for Christmas week.'

Mrs. Minkle thanked him, thanked him profusely, and the postman felt proud. But he was disturbed when he failed to receive any rent from Mrs. Minkle for his very first week. There was no payment and no explanation. It was strange. He thought her a little too apt, too prompt, to take advantage of his generosity; but there it was, he was not going back on it, he was not going to reproach

her, it was one of his principles; if his principles were costly he respected them all the more. A few days later the quaker Woodberry beckoned from the doorway opposite, and Mr. Balloon crossed over to him. 'Haven't you told anybody you've bought the cottages yet?'

'O yes,' said Mr. Balloon. 'I told 'em, but . . .'

'Well, Mrs. Minkle brought the rent to me,' said Woodberry, handing him five shillings and threepence; then handing his five shillings and ninepence he continued, 'so did your wife!'

'O dear me,' said Mr. Balloon, 'some misunderstanding. I'll see to it. I'll put it right. Thank you.' He pocketed the money and crossed over to his home and catechized the astounded Phœbe.

'Yes,' she said. 'Mrs. Minkle did bring the rent to me, but I wouldn't have it. I told her it was all a mistake, and she said you must be mad. I gave it to her back. I *told* her you were mad, I thought you *were* mad!'

'Look here!' barked Mr. Balloon. 'I'd like a little less chatter about me being mad. I tell you I bought the cottages, and the rent's got to be paid to me, understand that! And if you're so very sane . . . well, the sooner I go quietly and decently mad the better I shall like it. You can go on boiling yourself in yer own precious sanity. It's . . . it's detestable, and that's it and all!'

Stupefied Phœbe learned in due course the truth of his statement. How the money had been raised

she never knew. She dared not ask him, she feared some terrible misdemeanour that would certainly soon be discovered, and that he'd be 'put away' somewhere. However, she had the sharpest cause to realize the fact of his ownership some two years later when relations between them had become strained to breaking point.

The postman was frequently detailed for an early duty on Sunday mornings. Rising at four o'clock he would tumble into his clothes and clatter off to the centre of the town. Punctual and perfunctory, he hated any interference with this routine. What *is* man that Thou art mindful of *him*, this vain wraith gulping in the darkness? Courtship, marriage – as we have already seen – and the possession of a home, are mere incidents in the general life of work, that principal and absorbing medium. But alas, Saturday night was always specially devoted by Phœbe to a soirée or a sing-song or some other devilry of the kind, and she would arrive home at one o'clock or even two, often a little inebriated and decidedly vocal. She would clump into bed beside him, rousing him to a fury of wakefulness and anger; he could not sleep again, he loathed her heavily-breathing presence. None of Phœbe's escapades appeared to affect him except that. He invariably harangued the tipsy woman in these terms.

'I don't care a damn what you do, or where you been, or what time you come home, or what you bin up to. You can go with forty men if you like, and

stay out all night s'far as I care. But when you comes home on Saturday nights, all I ask is you to go and turn in with Kate,' – Kate being their daughter.

'Ho, no,' hiccouped Mrs. Balloon, sometimes poking him with monstrous playfulness, 'ho, no, I married to you; s'wife's place to sleep with rusband.'

Argument, persuasion, abuse, all were useless; Phœbe had no compunction, and was obdurate even when he swore he would leave her and seek a lodging elsewhere. Once again fate interposed curiously on his behalf. The Jacksons, old friends of John's, were in difficulties. Jackson feared that his furniture would be seized and sold up, and wife and children turned into the street. John cogitated and put a plot together. He did it without scruple, for his children were grown up and the cottage was now free of rent. He discovered a small house to let in Baxter Street. He rented it and told Jackson to take his furniture and family there.

'I'll pay the rent,' said the postman, 'and I'll pay you a sum each week towards my keep if you'll look arter me.' The arrangement was joyfully accepted, the furniture quickly and discreetly transferred. When John casually informed his wife that he would be leaving her at the end of the week, Phœbe sniffed derisively, attaching no more credence to the statement than she did in the case of the purchase of the cottages. He was 'touched' again! But on Saturday evening the dour little postman went to their home for the last time. It was empty, Phœbe having

already departed to a spree; neither his sons nor his daughter were there. He looked round the bare kitchen; it struck him as meagre and untidy, it was so dim and there was so much worn-out linoleum. On the table lay a blacklead brush and some orange-peel. He threw the orange-peel into the grate and put the blacklead brush under the sink. Then taking his few articles of clothing he departed to Baxter Street, where he lived for a long time with the Jacksons very happily indeed. And it must be confessed that when Phœbe recovered from the blow she lived no less happily under the bereavement until she recklessly brought another man to the cottage to live with her, a ne'er-do-well, Peter Simpson by name. Now John Balloon had no scruples about such an affair – he did not mind her gallivanting with men; she was free to do as she liked about that, and always had been, as he pointed out. He, too, took as much freedom as he gave – that in short was his standpoint, his reason, his excuse. But that he, John Balloon, should go on working in the world, and keep the roof of his house over the head of his wife's paramour, this Peter Simpson – certainly such a condition did not come within the ambit of his ideas or intentions.

'O, no,' mused John, 'I shan't 'ave ee!'

His cunning mind again hatched a plot: he sold the cottages for £350. In a short time the dalliance of Peter and Phœbe was confounded by a landlord, a new strange man, who demanded rent – and a big

rent, too. To Phœbe he seemed more mad than the previous landlord; Peter in an unwonted burst of valour proposed to kill him. But Peter did not do this; in point of fact he ran away, and Phœbe was left to lament the truth that while the course of true love never did run smooth, that of the scandalous variety is full of woes and excels in tribulation.

POLLY MORGAN

NO, I SUPPOSE THERE ARE NO SUCH THINGS AS ghosts, not real ones, but I do know that it is possible to *believe* in one, just one fair fond illusion, a blessed exception made for you and no other, because that was the experience of my Aunt Agatha – and it may yet be mine. I was her favourite niece, I always spent my summers in her home.

Our family was a seafaring one, but she lived far from the sea on a long upland in the Chilterns. Copson was a dear and decent village; it began in an avenue of trees that ushered you from nowhere on those empty hills into a small common of turf and furze, a place of sun without shade, that the cuckoo loved; and then it trailed away along a lane to the open downs once more, where there was a windmill and a view over a vale. Almost the first thing you saw on entering Copson's quiet road was a *Caution to Beggars*, but it might just as well have been an invitation to them. They seemed to gravitate to Aunt Agatha's cottage and peep over the hedge at her in her garden amongst the violets or mignonette and the leafy things that hovered there, where as like as not she would be clipping her grass plot with a pair of dressmaking scissors. They did not need to ask for anything, they just conducted a silent raid upon her charitable emotions.

That high heath seemed to have been founded

in solitude. The fields flowed downwards from it on either side and your glance could follow only them and nothing else. A stone's-cast away there were no earthly features to meet the level gaze; on the right hand and the left there was nothing to be seen but the sky bending and breathing an admonition of silence. The score or so of scattered homes were obedient to that hush; the folk, though not unfriendly, were shy, and Aunt Agatha hadn't an intimacy with a soul in the place, knowing few of them save by name and none in the warmth of intercourse. And yet her heart was fervently with them in some aloof way.

One autumn morn, while cutting some chrysanthemum blooms in her garden, she heard the bell toll solemnly from the church on the far side of the common, signifying that someone was about to be buried. Who it was she did not know. By and by a cortège passed, a glass hearse containing a brown coffin that shone with brass and varnish. But not a flower or a mourner; beyond the official faces of the driver and the bearers walking beside the glass hearse there was no sign of grief or regret. Who could it be? Some poor creature who had died friendless? Her heart melted at those neglected obsequies, and hurrying indoors she changed into a black dress, took the sheaf of chrysanthemums and followed after the dead. By the time she reached the church door the service was over and the corpse was coming out to its burial. At the conclusion of

the interment Aunt Agatha dropped her flowers into the grave, weeping.

It was not until then that she saw the name upon the coffin, Roland Bird, a farmer rich and eccentric who had dwelt not far off. But what . . . what . . . what could it mean? He had sons and daughters, stout hearty creatures. Where were they? And a stout hearty wife. Why were they all absent? They could not be ill, not all of them, surely? Thus to neglect him – was it possible they did not care, that nobody cared? There was not even one of his labouring men, or a neighbour, not one. She was deeply perturbed and went home sighing at the unkindness of human nature.

Aunt Agatha learned next day that the odd-minded farmer had solemnly and sternly enjoined that none should follow him to his grave and that no flowers should be thus foolishly wasted.

Well, my Aunt's violation of the dead man's wish had been – I know – as innocent as the act of a child, the impulsive offering of a heart most tender; but it was gossiped about, and in time a rumour grew like a maggot in a pippin that she must have been intimate with the queer farmer, a secret mistress or something vile like that. Poor dear Aunt had her qualms, but for some time she was unaware of this false gossip, such a rude interpretation of a simple deed, yet in the end it must have reached her. As for her qualms, qualms was no word for her remorse. You see, the man's last solemn wish had

been flouted, innocently enough, but to flout a dying prayer was irreparable, fatal as death itself, and Aunt Agatha was such a sweet maidenly old thing that her distress almost prostrated her. You could not, you could never, compound for such an unlucky mistake, it would go rolling on, rolling in endless waves through everlasting time. What the soul enjoins when its hand is on the latch of eternity is sacred, embodying hopes and aims that must have mystical warrant, though they seem slight and stupid to us. And she had ruined them, not callously but carelessly, as one kicks over an ant-hill.

When I went to stay with her in the following summer I heard of the strange upshot of the matter, partly from her and partly from her maid, a coarse creature named Fittle who was loquacious and careless but blindly devoted. The cottage has six rooms, with its windows all latticed, the steep roof all tiled, the walls smothered in creeper that turns from green to red, and it has a lovely tall chimney. What is there so ineffably right about a tall chimney that it makes a squat one look vulgar? Fittle had her grievance against the windows – they were hard to keep clean and leaked in the rain – but these artistic things all have their snares, everyone knows. Aunt's home was far too full of furniture, you could not step in it without pushing or writhing; it was brightened with exotic chintzes, and objects of brass and china bloomed uselessly on shelf and wall. But it was airily snug and smelt of flowery age; the

limes breathed beside it, the furze burgeoned, and the cuckoo cried. Each year the place seemed to grow choicer and the little garden lovelier, except for that corner where a line of Fanny Fittle's intimate washing always made me impatient. Absurd, but at thirty one is so easily vexed.

Choicer and lovelier, I have said, and this year there was a change in my aunt, not at all retrograde but still a little mysterious. We had used to spend our evenings in games of chess or patience, or with music, but now as soon as twilight began my aunt would leave me and go to her own room to sup alone, and I would not see her again until the next morning. I took this to be a whim of approaching age, but her appearance belied the hint; she had indeed a new bloom, though it was not the bloom of youth; it was more a kind of spiritual grace. She was pale but dainty and trim, and kept up old fashions in her appearance, parting her grey-gold hair in the middle and folding in on her neck. After noon she wore lace mittens and carried a fan. I was half her age, and brown, and neither delicate nor dainty. I wanted to read to her in bed, but she patted my hand with her fan and gently refused. 'No, dear Polly.' Her manner was so suave and tender that I could do nothing more, and I was much bothered until Fanny Fittle enlightened me. Then I was shocked; for a while I was frightened.

'She thinks she is haunted, Miss Morgan, but don't you believe it,' said Fittle to me. 'It's just a

little fancy of hers and I have to pretend. It's all of a game with her.'

'A game?'

'Yes, can you understand it? a game with herself.'

'But what sort of game?'

'Well, as near as I can tell you, Miss, it's a game with a ghost, though I don't believe in 'em. Yes, and she likes it – an old lady of sixty! And the courage of a horse! But you can't credit her. How can you? I don't. It's not my place to do so, but I expostulated of it and she was quite short with me. There may be ghosts and ghosts, but you can't believe what you hear if you don't see it that way.'

In utter mystification I stared at the woman. She was about my own age, with an angular ill-assorted body, all odds and ends of anatomy. I could see she was seriously perplexed by my aunt's foible.

'What do you mean? – does she see anything?'

'Not that I know of, Miss,' Fittle replied. 'I don't see anything myself, and I don't see how she can, but she thinks she does.'

'Of course she doesn't see anything,' I said. 'Of course not! What is there to see? And when? And where?'

Fittle went on clearing my supper-table with a provoking deliberation.

'Of course, Miss, I don't know, but I do know there's something going on that I don't understand and can't get to the bottom of. And that upsets

you; it would upset anyone. There's her supper, for instance; what does that signify?'

'Yes, Fanny. Why does she always have it alone, in her bedroom?'

'Well,' said Fittle, with an air, 'that's the question. *Does* she have it alone?' She hung in silence upon the significance of the inquiry, as if she knew an incredible answer. I could only shake my head, not denyingly, but to express my bewilderment.

'She may, or she may not,' the servant continued. 'But I can tell you something you perhaps don't know, Miss Morgan. I have to lay supper every evening for two people up there.' She pointed to the ceiling. I waited for her to go on.

'For two people, two of everything. . . .'

I interrupted: 'That might be for a friend.'

'It's a friend that never comes then,' Fittle said.

'And a ghost couldn't eat anything,' I suggested, 'could it?'

Fanny countered with triumph: 'It never does eat anything – not that you'd notice. I can't tell for sure, because I'm not allowed to clear away the supper things at night, not until next morning. I'm never let into her room after I've taken up the supper; the door is always locked then. I lay for two persons, but only one eats it. At least I can't say for certain, but there's only one plate ever used. She might clean the other one herself.'

It was no use pretending to myself that all this was just a vagary of Aunt's. I tried, without con-

viction, to convey that impression to Fanny Fittle. I was wasting words.

'Who is the ghost?' I asked, 'and when does it come?'

'It isn't a ghost at all really,' explained she, 'it's only an idea of hers, a fancy. She talks to herself a lot in there, but she talks in whispers so I can't hear the words.'

'When?'

'Often – whenever she likes.'

'But what is it supposed to be?' I urged impatiently. 'Is it a man, or a woman, or a child, or what is it? When did it begin? I've never heard any old tales of this house; have you?'

The servant went on meticulously folding up the white table-cloth, and without giving me a glance, said: 'No, Miss.'

'No what?'

'I mean I never heard any tales, and I don't know who it might be.'

'But you know when it started?'

'O, that? Yes. It started in the spring, two or three months ago.'

'What makes you think it's a ghost?'

'But I don't, Miss. I keep telling you I don't think it's a ghost at all. She's only pretending to herself, a sort of game, like children play.'

I did not accept that for one moment, it was too suggestive of senility, and Aunt Agatha was never more vividly alive.

'Doesn't do her any harm,' continued Fittle, 'only I thought I'd better tell you.'

'You don't think she is going – well, how can I put it? – silly, do you, Fittle?'

Fittle smiled with compassionate loyalty. 'O, no fear she ain't.' Dropping the cloth into a drawer she whisked off with the tray of dishes, and left me to the questioning blankness of the candle-lit room.

Before retiring to bed I went along to the kitchen. As I approached the door I could hear Fanny playing hymns on a mouth-organ, a hobby of hers which my aunt tolerated, perhaps even encouraged. Though Fanny hadn't a grain of religious feeling, her rhythmic fervour was mainly stimulated by evangelical compositions. I paused while she breathed 'Through the night of doubt and sorrow,' and then peeped in. The kitchen was lit by a paraffin lamp because Fittle disliked candles, and had a long shelf of brown jars full of pickles and jam, which strangely enough my aunt disliked.

'I wanted to ask you, Fanny: does she have her supper in her room when I am not here?'

'O yes. It's nothing to do with your being here, don't think that, Miss Polly.'

'And does she ever see "things" anywhere else, or is it always only upstairs?'

No, as far as Fanny knew, it was always upstairs.

I went off to my room and walked slowly past my aunt's door, but I heard nothing, no whispering;

saw nothing, no ghosts. Fanny was an idiot. But I was glad to get safely into bed.

How can I write down the strangeness of the thing that came to inhabit there, that grew as the year grew and intolerably grew, a portent without horror but full of tragic desire, a doom without reason but full of the truth of sorrow! O, if only I too could have sunk into a grave and left all my fondness and foolishness in the sieve of time! How lovely was our home that year ere folly overtook me: the limes breathed, the furze burgeoned, the cuckoo cried. And there was no doubt Aunt Agatha saw, or thought she saw, some embodiment of a desire or a fantasy from a realm unknown, and day by day a conviction grew in me that she was open to communications of which I, too gross, too crudely human, was not aware, and shall never be. What were they? Whatever they were, if Aunt was bewitched she was beautifully bewitched, she throve like one who had access to some secret fountain of immortal youth. Withal, she was so cunning whenever I got to the point of questioning her that I could not but conclude there was more, far more, in the mysterious business than Fanny knew, or than I was ever likely to know.

One night I sat in the garden long after Aunt had gone to bed. I sat on until the moon, fully risen, cast such a trance of light that it paled white faces and deepened the black shades. There was not a puff of air, not one breathing sigh; a fleck of

down from a feather would have fallen straight without wandering; and yet the two windows of Aunt's bedroom were closed. There was no light from either, but in that moonlight, one could not even imagine that darkness would ever come again. Then I went and stood under the quicken tree, for I do not like to remain still in the fullness of moonlight, not for very long. I have a feeling that it may do one harm. What harm? I don't know, I am not timid or superstitious, but it is the same mood in which I cover up mirrors during a thunderstorm, and don't walk under ladders. Silly, perhaps, but I must do these things. And I do believe that the moon's light mysteriously caresses the passionate nature of women, for desire of love came to me there, love that I had never known and often despaired of. I was not attractive, as Aunt Agatha must have been, as she was even now though she was twice my age; I was neither delicate nor dainty. She had never married, yet it was certain that she must once have been wooed by heaps of men. I was already thirty, no man had ever wooed me, but I was romantically stirred by the projected visit of Aunt Agatha's godson, Johnny Oliphant. He was captain of a vessel trading in eastern seas but now being refitted at Bristol, and in a day or two he was coming to us at Copson for a week. As I stood under the quicken tree in the moonlight my thoughts were of him whom I had not even seen. Already he was pleading for my love. Divine foolishness!

Suddenly I had to look round. I saw nothing, but my heart was beating with a wild ardour. For a moment I had the fearful thought that I was stifling in the marvellous light, that I was about to fall dead. In terror I looked up to Aunt Agatha's room. At that moment the right-hand window gently rattled. I had fleeting time to wonder why a casement should rattle in that windless air, when I saw my aunt come to the window in her lacy gown and open its fellow. Amazingly she leaned out and murmured softly 'Ah, you have come!' There was, I could swear, not a scoop of wind in the entire world; not one draught in all the flaring heavens; but I saw and heard the hanging creeper above the window sharply shaken. A look of apprehension floated across the pallor of her face.

'Roland, take care!' she breathed. 'O, take care!'

She put her hands on the window-sill as if watching some peril that was hidden from me, then with a sigh of passionate welcome she lifted her arms like a woman embracing. But, unless she embraced a vision that my eyes could not see, there was nothing there. A moment after she pulled back the casement, closing it. I saw no more, and the returning silence boomed with the pounding of my heart. I covered my face with my burning hands. When I looked up again all was as before, white moonlight, still trees, stolid house. I crept back to the candle-lit room. Fanny Fittle had gone to bed, I was alone with my awed thoughts.

Was my dear aunt haunted or cursed? I could not think so. I had seen only a gesture, a gesture of love that embraced nothing, nothing but an illusion. Yet the name! The name, familiarly spoken, was that of the farmer in whose grave she had dropped her offering of forbidden flowers! The man to whom malicious rumour had given her as a mistress, though I knew there was not even a possibility of truth in the malignant tale!

In a while I had to go up to my bed, and when I came to my aunt's door, passed swiftly in terror, I swear I heard the noise of dishes and knives and whisperings. Not until dawn did I fall asleep.

When I woke and recalled the events and emotions in the moonlit garden they seemed preposterous; the sun shone, and my aunt hummed so happily about the house. I could not forbear asking if she had slept well.

'I had a delightful night,' she replied, 'and you?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Did you dream?'

'No. And you?'

'I don't think I was dreaming,' I said. 'Do you ever dream, Aunt?'

'Sometimes, Polly. I had a funny little dream two or three nights ago. I dreamed I was looking towards the church from our garden. It was sunset, and there was a blackbird singing on the very top of the gilt vane on the steeple. I said to it: "You must stop singing now," but it would not stop and so I

looked about until I found a bow and arrow. The bow was black but the arrow was golden. I took up the bow and arrow and I called out to the blackbird: "Now you must be quiet." But it took no notice of me, so I fitted the arrow to the bow and shot it off at the blackbird.'

I had to giggle at the notion of Aunt Agatha shooting a bird!

'Did you kill it?'

'No. The arrow sailed slowly high up into the air, a most lovely curve, glistening, and then it began to swoop down towards the blackbird, and just as it was going to pierce it the bird opened its mouth, caught the arrow with its beak, and settled down again as if nothing untoward had happened. It was extraordinarily clever, I never saw anything so clever in my life! And then the bird came flying to me here from the steeple and laid the arrow in my hand. O, I felt so ashamed. What a pity that we cannot interpret our dreams!'

My dear aunt looked so simple, so innocent, that I could have wept. But then my emotions had been fearfully torn by the sight of that moonlight rendezvous.

'It does not seem very difficult to interpret,' I ventured.

'What do you think it means?' asked my aunt eagerly.

'The bird and the church are obvious,' I said. 'The bird is Farmer Bird. A black bird – he is dead.

It is all symbolic of what happened last year when you laid the flowers in his grave. And so on.'

I saw from her manner that Aunt Agatha had already thought it out for herself.

'That is very clever of you,' she said. 'I think it does mean that. But the arrow, the arrow!' And she repeated eagerly 'What about the arrow?'

'It must mean the flowers. . . .'

'Yes? The chrysanthemums I took. They were yellow. I ought not to have taken them, so he brings them back!'

'And yet,' I went on steadily, 'it might mean Cupid's arrow.'

Aunt Agatha was bright-eyed as a child listening to a new tale.

'Cupid's arrow, Polly! You mean . . . love?'

'Yes, Aunt, of course I mean love,' I said sharply.

'Love!' echoed Aunt Agatha. 'That's very strange.'

'Tell me about it, Aunt,' I blurted out. 'Tell me, I am worried. I was in the garden last night and I saw . . . everything. It frightened me.'

'Frightened you? What did you see – a ghost?'

'No, not a ghost.' I told her what I had seen her do, of the words I heard her speak, of the rustling creeper, of the window shaken.

'My child!' said my aunt tenderly. 'You must have been dreaming!'

'Am I dreaming now?' I asked. 'Were you dreaming then? Of course you were not, nor was I.

But something is happening to you about this Roland Bird – tell me, Aunt; the farmer that died – as if his curse were following you. It sounds fatuous to ask if he is haunting you or if you are bewitched by him, but for pity's sake tell me, Aunt, what it all means, and I'll help you.'

She was so silent for some moments, I could hear the watch on my wrist ticking sharply, and a bee buzzing in the window filled the room with uproar.

'You can't help, darling,' said my aunt.

'But, Aunt, let me try,' I pleaded.

'I don't want any help. I am very happy, the way I am. My happiness is mine, no one can touch it. No one can share it. I am not cursed or bewitched: how could you think it, dear Polly?'

That is how my astonishing aunt talked to me. I tried once more, as casually as I could manage, though, by God! the utterance almost choked me:

'Then you do see this Roland Bird. What do you do?'

'Ah, Polly,' my aunt replied. 'You must not ask me that.'

Either my aunt was mad or I was mad. Yet you can never doubt your own sanity or nullify your own experience. I had seen what I had seen, my aunt had not utterly denied it, and it was incredible. But people live and have experiences which do not tally with your own. There are those who affirm, those who deny, and those who ignore. I was to learn that

though I might ignore my aunt's ghost I could not ignore her obsession. I could deny her thought, but I could not deny her experience. I could call it foolish, I could not affirm it false. And in the face of her new bloom, her calm happiness, my fears for her sanity were but a mockery of my own. And yet . . . was I really living in a house with a woman who was visited by a ghost, a ghost that she welcomed and loved, that she even – God help her – tried to feed! What is the human heart made of? I mean in its quality of love? For a while I could think of nothing better than to offer my aunt some purgative medicine. With a serene smile she waved me off – and I took it myself.

Then, plump into the midst of this unnerving puzzle dropped Johnny, Captain Oliphant. Only for a week, one tiny little week out of the ten thousand days and nights we had lived unknown, so that I scarcely knew him long enough to be able to describe him, but he was not like a sailor man, no 'Avast there!' or heaving-ho! – he was much more like a nice lawyer.

On the first day we went roving in the hills. He kissed me and I kissed him. Of course I told him all about Aunt's queer behaviour, and he was sympathetic and he was kind.

But on the second day he had thought it all over, and he was more matter-of-fact. He said she was 'batchy,' that it would be better to cut the creeper away from the casement and fit some pegs in the

loose window. And we said we would do this together, unknown to her. Then we went roving on the enchanting hills again and forgot about it. I was alone with him and already I was in love with him, desperately.

On the third day he asked me to marry him, and I said I would. He said: 'Thank you, Polly; thank you, Polly; you shall never regret it. I love you dearly.' And I said: 'I love you too.' So banal, and yet so moving – God keep me simple. I promised to marry him when he returned from China in the spring. And I promised to be at Marseilles to meet him then. I promised this, I promised that, I promised anything – and I gave, too. He was my handsome Johnny. I went to his room and slept with him, and all the days and nights he was with me we were but one. Happy, happy time. And then we did something I wish we had not done; unknown to Aunt we clipped back the creeper from her bedroom window, and secretly fitted two tiny wedges in the casement. I wish we had not done it.

I was unable to go with him to Bristol; although he was ardent and I was longing, he went away alone, and I could hardly describe him now. One little week out of all our ten thousand nights and days! Just before he sailed he sent me a ring of diamonds, and a power of attorney to help me prepare a home against his return, a home like Aunt Agatha's; for that he loved and the pretty country too.

After he was gone I let my aunt's secret alone, I did not probe any further. My own secret filled all my life, and I kept that from her as long as I was at Copson. In three weeks or four I went back to London and settled down for the autumn and the long winter that was to pass before spring could come.

One of the letters he wrote me had a long analysis of Aunt Agatha's affair; he had worked out a theory about it.

'I trace it this way: she was in a state about butting in at that man's funeral and bowling things over like she did, and thought she would be haunted or cursed in some way. Well, when you *think* you are going to be haunted you very likely *will* be. But this rumour that happened along about her being his fancy – you can see that this gave a romantic turn to her idea. No doubt about that. It's all auto-suggestion, of course. She was not annoyed by that rumour; as a matter of fact, she was secretly pleased. Doesn't matter a bit whether it is true or not. If you are to be haunted you might just as well be haunted nicely and agreeably, and that's the whole bottom of her queer fancy. He would not curse her, but he might haunt her, and if he haunted her as a lover he would be welcome. And so he did, and so he was. That's the way I trace it, for if you *think* you are haunted you *are* haunted. Religious history is full of such cases. She thinks he is in love with her now, and pretends that he comes to visit her. Well,

you saw what that amounted to? Of course we can't talk of ghosts, ghosts don't exist, it is a clear case of romantic hallucination. Good for her! She's an old maid and it does her no harm.'

I left it at that; it seemed but half the truth, but the other half might be odious, so I probed no further. My own secret I kept, though Aunt and I corresponded regularly. In a very short time I could not fail to notice the sad tones faintly echoing in her letters. No, she was not as well as she had been. Tired easily. Old age, she supposed, or the sharp winds.

I comforted her and promised to visit her at Christmas, but long before then I was hurriedly summoned to Copson, where I found her far gone and hopelessly ill.

She had just incredibly faded away, a thread of bones, all her lustre gone. What had happened? What was the matter with her? No one knew, not even the doctor, or Fanny Fittle, or anybody. I bowed my head in grief upon her pillow.

For some days she lingered, not so much Aunt Agatha as a pale wraith of her, and before she died she spoke to me of the thing that was destroying her. She lay staring towards the window. It was a gaunt, gloomy day, not ominous but passive, with neither wind to hearten nor sun to encourage. The brightest thing, the only bright thing, was the pale smoke twirling from the village chimneys.

'He makes no sign,' she whispered, 'he has gone.'

'What, Aunt?'

'Gone for ever.'

'Who has gone?'

There was reproach in the eyes that looked up at me: 'You saw us – didn't you? – one night – didn't you? You saw, didn't you? You said you saw.'

So eager was her desire for confirmation that I had not the heart to deny her moonlit Eden.

Sadly she murmured on: 'He found me. I had gone to the grave against his command, he said, and for that his spirit would always follow me, he said. He came; he forgave me, he said. It was strange, beautiful, but it has come to an end.' The thin lips sighed. 'It is hard to feel so forsaken. There is no sign from him now, is there? I was sad about it for a while, rather sad, Polly, but I am all right again now.' And she fondly pressed my hand.

God knows what Roland Bird was like in the life. No Endymion certainly. He may have been an oaf, a fat ox – he probably was – but it did not matter. He had been but the crooked key which unlocked for her a glade in the Hesperides, and she had walked there until our rude hands – Johnny's and mine – had carelessly wrecked the dream.

All her possessions came to me. Except for a small legacy to her godson Johnny her little fortune

was mine, and her house was mine, but for a while after her death I could not bring myself to live there, not alone, and so I left Fittle in charge and went back to London. I wrote to Johnny in Sumatra all about it. Now, of course, there was no more need for me to seek a house for me and Johnny. I arranged for some alterations to be made in the new year; some things I discarded, adding others, but it was always the same old house from the very door-mat to Fanny Fittle herself, my home and Johnny's. I wrote to him in Rangoon all about it. Every week I had letters from him somewhere in the eastern world, the kind of letters that simple men write to their sweethearts, full of affection and longing. Probably he would be a little later than he had thought. Probably he would not be at Marseilles until the first week in May, but I should have definite news immediately the situation was clear. And he sent me a letter from Tokio on Easter Monday – and that was the last I heard from Johnny.

I was in fear from the very first – I am sure, now, that it is the vengeance of that baffled ghost. We had betrayed Aunt Agatha between us. It was only I who saw the bush fluttering on a windless night, and heard the casement shaken, but together we had cut back the tendrils and stayed the window's clatterings. And who knows by what slender means the soul moves to its difficult desire, or what its desire may be? I was in fear from the first, and now I am

sure: something rocks on in anguish and takes its toll from our lives.

I came back to Copson at midsummer and here I shall abide. I did not even wear black. I knew he was dead, so what was I to Johnny, or he to me? I had known him for a week of days, a holy Eden, but now I cannot recall his appearance. There is so invincible a blank now that at times I have said to myself, 'No, I never knew any Captain Oliphant. I am like Aunt Agatha, who thought she was loved by a man who was dead.' And then, when my mind tries to pierce through the void to that divinity we knew, there interposes itself the figure of a man with a cocked hat and a sword by his side. That is how a sailor should be, I suppose, but my Johnny was drowned in only his shirt, one dark night, his ship mysteriously colliding with another. Only seven men were lost, but my Johnny was one of them, drowned in the white foam that flowers in the Chinese seas. That was not fate, he was never unlucky! It was vengeance.

I should have been his bride, but I am nothing now. I look out of the lattice here in my bedroom and see moonlight and the quicken tree. The creeper hangs again where once it hung and brushed the mullions airily. Long ago I took out the wedges from the window. I can faintly hear the hymn that Fanny Fittle is playing on her mouth-organ; I hate the sound, but my aunt tolerated it, and so do I. I always have my supper here, in this room, alone.

The table is set for two, even now. Poor credulous fool! Whom do I long for? The casement is softly shaken and the creeper writhes, but no one comes, nor will ever come, for me.

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